The Pleasures of Postcolonial Parody: Beyond Comic Subversion

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Abstract

This project investigates what I am calling postcolonial parody through an analysis of a corpus of French-language novels. The central argument maintains that postcolonial literary criticism routinely interprets parody in postcolonial texts as a strategy of subversion, and in this way oversimplifies the way that parody – and perhaps, by extension, literature as such – engages with the reader and the world. My aim is to propose an alternative to the current critical approach. The texts analysed are by three contemporary authors: Alain Mabanckou, Dany Laferrière and Calixthe Beyala. These writers have been well-received by a large European and North American audience and their highly accessible humour also shares a provocative edge, making it particularly appropriate for this study. A comparative analysis of some of the best-selling work by these now well-established authors has the potential to offer new interpretations of their writing. In spite of the complexities of intention and reception, comic writing of this sort is often co-opted by an orthodox form of postcolonial criticism which responds to the paradoxes and ambiguity of parodic language by presuming certain things about its motives and implications. I will identify the shortcomings of this critical 'subversive reflex', advocating an approach that looks more carefully at the effect of parodic techniques in postcolonial writing. Focusing in turn on irony, intertextuality, reflexivity, and mock-documentary this thesis highlights how these literary techniques in the works of 'minority' or 'francophone' authors are rarely discussed as postmodern comic devices but rather subsumed under the banner of postcolonial resistance. My analysis shows that whilst some authors may intend their comedy to have a subversive effect their humour does not necessarily always work in this way and it may not be consistently directed against the former coloniser. Parody crystallises key questions regarding postcolonial critics' recourse to ideas of context and the biographical author-figure in their speculations on texts' political impact. An exploration of postcolonial parody, then, sheds light on wider issues regarding the relationship between texts and their contexts, and the models of reading that currently predominate in certain branches of criticism.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of John Robson (1934–2013).

Contents

Introduction

The impetus for this project came from my sense that parody poses a problem for postcolonial criticism insofar as it represents a dimension of postcolonial culture that does not fit with the conceptualisation of postcolonial studies as a highly politicised and socially engaged field of critical inquiry. Whilst it can certainly be politically orientated, parody is also often open-ended, impartial, and playful. It is the fun side of parody – a comic value that is not necessarily tied to notions of political resistance – that has, I will argue, been overlooked by critical attempts to reconcile the technique's pleasurable dimension with the type of writing that postcolonial authors are 'supposed' to write (i.e. resistant, anti-colonial, counter-discursive, oppositional, even revolutionary). Postcolonial parody represents an anomaly, then, in the sense that the humour that it generates seems to contradict a particular orthodox characterisation of postcolonial writing as unremittingly 'serious' or always fundamentally concerned with social injustice and political struggle.

Focusing on a selection of novels written in French, this thesis will investigate parodic expression in postcolonial contexts by using postmodern conceptualisations of this device to highlight the complexity and variety of the comic effects that it can generate. As my starting point, I will outline some of the main critical approaches to parodic writing that were established in the field of postcolonial studies during the late 1980s and 1990s. Although the view of parody as a subversive strategy promulgated in certain foundational works of postcolonial theory has been challenged in various quarters, my aim is to demonstrate how certain assumptions about parody that were put forward in these works of criticism continue to influence the critical reception of comic francophone novels. My contention is that even if parody does have social or political implications, the emphasis on the supposedly subversive

potential of this technique in the field of postcolonial studies has overshadowed its many other possible motives and repercussions. By drawing upon renewed understandings of parody that have been put forward in fields of critical inquiry outside the domain of postcolonial studies, I hope to offer new insights into the works under discussion in this thesis that may in turn shed light on the limitations of current models of reading in certain orthodox branches of postcolonial criticism.

Parody's association with insurgency makes it an ideal focus for an examination of critical claims about comic subversion. Following a number of recent interventions, my argument here proceeds from the premise that an understanding of parody as a type of counter-discourse arguably does not always capture the ambiguity of much contemporary art and culture. Although parody has traditionally been defined as an imitation set *against* an original, reappraisals of the concept argue for a less antagonistic translation of the word that would take into account the fact that the prefix 'par-' also implies collaboration, homage, or acknowledgement of an original. In their respective works on parody, Robert Chambers and Linda Hutcheon have both called attention to parody's duality: they note the word's roots in the theatre of ancient Greece and argue that whilst it is often translated from the Greek as 'counter-song' it can also be interpreted as 'beside-song'[1] or 'beside-or-against-song'.[2]

In this introduction and in the rest of this thesis, I do not want to suggest that arguments about parodic subversion in postcolonial fiction are invalid in every case, and nor do I want to dismiss outright the importance of critical work that has convincingly demonstrated the resistant quality of humour in certain postcolonial texts. Nevertheless, one of the issues that I will try to elucidate in the following chapters concerns the way certain strands of postcolonial criticism struggle to reconcile parody's duality with the conceptualisation of this device as a politically subversive tool. Broadly speaking, then, postcolonial parody can be seen to crystallise a tension between models of reading that stress language's multiple meanings and other modes of interpretation that place an emphasis on

1 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, 2nd edn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 32.
2 Robert Chambers, *Parody: The Art that Plays with Art* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 3.

literature's political resistance, raising questions about what we mean as critics when we refer to a literary text as 'subversive'.

As David Jefferess has noted in *Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Liberation and Transformation* (2008), the idea of subversion has always been central to the project of postcolonial studies. In his examination, Jefferess points out that, despite often being used to describe postcolonial cultures, the term subversion is rarely qualified or scrutinised. He states:

> By first privileging particular literary texts that function to 'resist' colonialism, and then translating this organization of texts into a reading practice, postcolonial expression becomes synonymous with resistance. Further, what it means to resist is left unexamined. The postcolonial text as counter-discursive is resistant in so far as it is 'different'.[3]

Jefferess's implication – that postcolonial texts are considered subversive almost by default or simply by virtue of being deemed 'postcolonial' – echoes Elleke Boehmer's prior critique of the 'warring dichotomy' that results from diametrically opposed definitions of the postcolonial as either 'subversion and plenitude' or 'the single-voiced authority of colonial writing'. One of the consequences of this binary, Boehmer argues, is that 'the postcolonial tends automatically to be thought of as multivocal, "mongrelized", and disruptive, even though this is not always the case'.[4]

Insofar as my exploration of postcolonial parody will re-evaluate some of the ways that this type of writing has been valorised on the basis of its supposedly subversive properties, my work here will engage with what Jefferess shows to be a fairly pervasive reliance upon notions of resistance in postcolonial criticism. By drawing upon postmodern theoretical works, I hope to shed some more light on the complex nature of comic subversion, as my sense is that the intricacies of this idea are routinely glossed over in some strands of

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3 David Jefferess, *Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Liberation and Transformation* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008), p. 16.
4 Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 4.

postcolonial criticism. My engagement with the concept of subversion in this thesis also involves re-evaluating arguments about parody's formal subversion – say of texts, genres, or grammar – which, at times, are elided with other types of subversion involving more tangible effects in the extra-textual world. By taking a closer look at how conclusions about a text's formally subversive qualities seem to get blurred with unwarranted assertions about its impact on the reader and a wider audience, my analysis will call into question arguments relating to postcolonial literature's political subversiveness in more general terms by showing that these claims are frequently founded upon speculations about texts' intention and reception.

Comic devices have been characteristic traits of francophone African fiction since the 1950s, even if some of the novels that include techniques such as parody and irony might not be described as 'comic' on the whole. Novels such as Bernard Dadié's *Un nègre à Paris* (1959), Mongo Beti's *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956), Ferdinand Oyono's *Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille* (1956), and Driss Chraïbi's *Le Passé simple* (1954) can be seen as part of a long-standing tradition of humour in French-language fiction by African authors. Comedy continued to be a defining trait of francophone literature in the latter half of the twentieth century, with the appearance of texts such as Sony Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demie* (1979), Emmanuel Dongala's *Jazz et vin de palme* (1982) and Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire* (1982). Humour also plays a prominent part in the works of a number of popular contemporary francophone writers. One could mention numerous examples, such as Louis-Philippe Dalembert's *Le Crayon du bon Dieu n'a pas de gomme* (1996), Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986), Gaston Kelman's *Je suis noir et je n'aime pas le manioc* (2003), Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), Abdourahman Waberi's *Aux États-Unis d'Afrique* (2006), and Faïza Guène's *Kiffe kiffe demain* (2004). These writers – amongst others – have become well known for their humorous portraits of postcolonial life and some of their texts could serve as a useful further testing ground for my theory about the way postcolonial parody engages with its readership. My argument in this thesis is constructed using a corpus that is confined to the works of three contemporary postcolonial authors

whose most successful novels are indisputably comic in intention and tone, and whose use of parodic expression shares the sort of provocative edge that attracts critics: Alain Mabanckou, Dany Laferrière and Calixthe Beyala. These authors are commercially successful writers whose fictional works have already been established as part of the 'postcolonial canon'; consequently, they each have a significant public following and a substantial body of criticism attached to their texts.

Postcolonial Precedents on Parody: Dead or Alive?

In a number of key works of postcolonial theory published during the 1980s and 1990s, parody was envisaged as a strategic reappropriative tool, a textual technique that provided a means for postcolonial writers to counteract forms of power and authority, notably in the form of 'dominant discourses'.[5] Even though this notion of parody has been contested over the course of the last thirty years, there does not appear to have been a clear movement *away* from the precedents that they set in the field of postcolonial studies. What I would like to demonstrate in this introduction, then, is that even if the theories that projected parody as a primarily political tool have been challenged to a degree, it seems that certain assumptions about this device implicit in these principal theoretical texts continue to exert influence in postcolonial criticism.

Postcolonial parody was first theorised as the concept of 'writing back' in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (1989) by Helen Tiffin, Bill Ashcroft and Gareth Griffiths. *The Empire Writes Back* provided a framework for analysing the ways in which postcolonial writers could be seen to undermine the authority of Europe's literary canons, and 'writing back' was an integral part of this initial understanding of postcolonial literature as a form of resistance towards a European 'centre'. After

5 In the postcolonial context, the term 'discourse' has gained widespread currency, usually being used to refer to manifestations of power in different textual forms. For a concise presentation of the term and its different usages, see Sara Mills, *Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1997).

considerable success, the notion of 'writing back' came under fire from practitioners in the field who noted how this view of postcolonial literature reinscribed certain binary oppositions and, as Arun Mukherjee argued, left postcolonial writers 'with *one modality*, *one discursive position*'.[6] Having played a major part in setting up the view of parody as a tool of anti-colonial resistance, 'writing back' gradually came to be seen as an outdated and problematic interpretive strategy. In what could be seen as evidence of the theory's definitive decline, in his introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* (2013), Graham Huggan referred to the 'writing back' model as 'virtually defunct'.[7]

Huggan's assertion appears premature, though, in light of recent work by critics who have tried to recuperate the concept, an example of which appears within *The Handbook of Postcolonial Studies* itself. Elleke Boehmer's article 'Revisiting Resistance: Postcolonial Practice and the Antecedents of Theory' provides a helpful chronology of the critical reception to 'writing back' and outlines its weaknesses as an interpretive framework, focusing on what she terms the 'still under-acknowledged antecedents-in-resistance of postcolonial theory'.[8] Boehmer expressly tries to revive the 'writing back' paradigm by linking it to the type of rebellious, revolutionary, and subversive spirit that it was associated with at the time of its inception, the aim being 'to reanimate some of the radical concerns with which *The Empire Writes Back* authors began, concerns which were however compromised to a degree by their overemphasis on poststructuralist (particularly deconstructionist) techniques at the expense of working out a grounded materialist approach to the field'.[9]

At the other end of the spectrum, some reinterpretations of 'writing back' have sought to re-envisage the idea by couching it in more neutral tones. For example, In *African*

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6 Arun Mukherjee, 'Whose Post-colonialism and Whose Post-modernism?', *World Literature Written in English*, 30, 2 (1990), 1–9 (p. 6).
7 Graham Huggan, 'General Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Graham Huggan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1–26 (p. 5), Footnote 1.
8 Elleke Boehmer, 'Revisiting Resistance: Postcolonial Practice and the Antecedents of Theory', in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Graham Huggan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 307–323 (p. 307).
9 Boehmer, 'Revisiting Resistance', p. 313.

Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality (2005) Byron Caminero-Santangelo claims to go beyond 'writing back' in his arguments about textual borrowing and stresses that not all intertextual references are directed at the West or the colonial archive.[10] He positions his analysis in contrast to 'The assumption that postcolonial writers revise canonical European literary texts in order to challenge European colonial ideology', an assumption that, he argues, 'is so pervasive that it persists in innumerable readings of postcolonial literatures and theoretical discussions of postcolonial textuality'.[11] Similarly, in *Postcolonial Contexts: Writing Back to the Canon* (2001) John Thieme disagrees with the way that 'writing back' automatically assumes antagonistic intent on the part of the postcolonial author, introducing a new vocabulary into his study (words such as 'pre-texts' and 'con-texts') in order to adapt the theory and cast it in a less combative light. Picking up on the appropriation by Tiffin et al. of Richard Terdiman's term 'counter-discourse', Thieme argues that 'writing back' is not necessarily synonymous with opposition:

> Since the relationship between postcolonial con-texts and canonical pre-texts is invariably a complex and ambivalent one, this study uses the terms 'counter-discourses' and 'writing back', rather than 'oppositional' to cover the varied range of interpretive strategies adopted by the con-texts: they are counter-discourses that write back to the canon in a multiplicity of ways and simply to label their stances 'oppositional' is invariably reductive.[12]

Thieme's revision of 'writing back', as well as his nuanced view of the term counter-discourse, divorces it from precisely the type of rebellious energy with which Boehmer seeks to reconnect it.

Thieme's arguments – and particularly the distinction that he makes between 'writing back' and counter-discourse, and the idea of subversion – have points of convergence with other reassessments of postcolonial parody that have maintained certain

10 Byron Caminero-Santangelo, *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad: Reading Postcolonial Intertextuality* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), p. 4.
11 Caminero-Santangelo, p. 2.
12 John Thieme, *Postcolonial Contexts: Writing Back to the Canon* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 4.

principles of the 'writing back' paradigm. There is evidence that throughout the 1990s and 2000s the concept of 'writing back' and ideas closely related to it continued to influence critical discussions of a number of the novels that I will focus on in this project. For instance, in Daniel Coleman's 1998 study of Laferrière's work *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) – a text that I will examine in Chapters 3 and 4 – Coleman sets out to reassess what he calls parody's liberatory potential. Revealing his 'growing apprehension' about the supposed success of this technique, Coleman asks: 'What happens after exposure? What happens when the targets of parody either do not recognize themselves or cynically enjoy the exposure without confronting the need for change?'.[13] This line of questioning sustains Coleman's investigation into the question of whether Laferrière's use of stereotypes is subversive or not. At one point, he argues that Laferrière's parody of clichés of sexuality:

> accomplishes an exposure of that discourse's history of avoidance and displacement. By so doing, Laferrière's metaparody works what critic of postcolonial literature Helen Tiffin would call a counter-discursive strategy. In re-siting the discursive genealogy of racialized sexuality, *How to Make Love to a Negro* takes some of the subversive steps Tiffin identifies.[14]

Nevertheless, Coleman's careful consideration of the pitfalls of parody as a mode of contestation leads him to conclude, somewhat confusingly, that although it is not possible to ascertain whether the parody is subversive or not, it still functions in a 'counter-discursive' fashion in line with arguments put forward by Tiffin:

> The question of the success or failure of Laferrière's metaparody to effect a transgression or intervention in discourses of racism or sexism remains, I believe, unresolvable. The novel operates on too many levels, behind too many screens of evasion and self-protection to settle

13 Daniel Coleman, *Masculine Migrations: Reading the Postcolonial Male in 'New Canadian' Narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 53.
14 Coleman, pp. 71–72. Coleman quotes this from Tiffin's article 'Postcolonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse' *Kunapipi*, 9, 3 (1987), 17–34 (p. 23).

> comfortably into any interpretive track. What the novel does demonstrate with remarkable clarity, however, is the tenacity with which a social discourse such as racialized sexuality continues to exercise powerful constraints upon the representations and performances of human beings. And *How To Make Love To A Negro* does do the innovative, counter-discursive work Tiffin identifies; it does map a dominant and oppressive etiology, and it does expose the illogic and avoidance underlying that discourse.[15]

In the above citation, 'counter-discourse' seems to imply the same idea as it does in Thieme's analysis, which is to say a neutral mode of 'writing back'; however, Coleman's suggestion that it performs innovative 'work', coupled with his descriptions of the term elsewhere in his examination, make it seem less neutral. Moreover, neither Coleman nor Thieme seem to address the fact that, even if we did work from the basis that counter-discourse doesn't necessarily imply subversion, it is difficult to argue, especially considering Terdiman's own use of the term, that it doesn't suggest an oppositionality of some kind that would still lock postcolonial writers into one discursive position.[16]

Coleman's examination is a good example of the type of partial, fuzzy set of shifts that have taken place in the reception of parodic literature that I mentioned earlier in this introduction. On the one hand, he draws upon a renewed concept of parody in his analysis – in this case Gary Saul Morson's notion of 'metaparody' – which attests to a deviation from the precedents set by early postcolonial critical work on the device. Furthermore, Coleman's analysis foregrounds the complexity of parody as a mode of contestation, which also departs from arguments put forward in previous theoretical texts. On the other hand, Coleman's study arguably only demonstrates a limited development in critical thinking on this topic, since despite his anxiety about parody's potential to function as a type of resistance, he still upholds an understanding of the text as oppositional by insisting in the final analysis that it performs 'counter-discursively' and therefore he reverts to a conventional view of parody.

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15 Coleman, pp. 79–80.
16 Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 66.

Traces of the 'writing back' methodology may also be discerned in the work of Odile Cazenave, who has discussed Calixthe Beyala's fiction in terms of its 'métissage', which is to say the author's 'twisting' of idiomatic expressions. Cazenave states in an article on Beyala's style that:

> The 'métissage' of the language goes both ways: there is indeed a certain gallicizing of her initial writing as the French idiomatic expressions and linguistic stereotypes show. But her voice, too, shows that the author has experimented with africanizing the French language, subverting in turn old French stereotypes, linguistic and ethnic ones.[17]

Like Coleman, Cazenave qualifies her assertion about the subversive effect of this type of parodic intertextuality by explicitly questioning the notion that the reader will interpret the author's use of this device as insurgency. As part of her deliberation on this issue, Cazenave references another important work of postcolonial theory, Mireille Rosello's *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures* (1998), when she points to the fact that Rosello's reading 'stresses Beyala's subversion of stereotypes'.[18] Rosello's study is another good example of a work of postcolonial theory from the 1990s that championed comedy's subversive qualities. Rosello developed ways of interpreting the humorous repetition of stereotypes that, in her eyes, could avoid the negative consequences of circulating clichéd images of race and culture. Advocating a 'ludic, subversive, and re-appropriative use of stereotypes',[19] she argued that the potentially negative consequences of ironic repetition could be circumvented through strategies of 'declining', such as 'stealing' and 'cheating'.

In her aforementioned article, Cazenave acknowledges the validity of Rosello's ideas when she concedes that 'On some levels, Beyala subverts canonical French, by doing

17 Odile Cazenave, 'Calixthe Beyala's "Parisian Novels": An example of Globalization and Transculturation in French Society', *Sites*, 4, 1 (2000), 119–127 (p. 125).
18 Cazenave, 'Calixthe Beyala's "Parisian Novels"', p. 123.
19 Mireille Rosello, *Declining the Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1998), p. 32.

what Gallimore rightly defines as giving some local flavor to the French language, mostly by twisting idiomatic expressions'.[20] But, importantly, Cazenave then goes on to voice doubts about whether the ironic verve of Beyala's linguistic twists will be picked up on by a French readership, expressing concern that Beyala's work might be taken at 'face value' and therefore 'not only does the irony get diluted, but instead of subvertion (sic), the stereotypical expression is reinforced'.[21] Cazenave's concern is not evident in her later works of criticism in which she champions the subversive properties of Beyala's fiction less ambiguously. In fact, in *Afrique sur Seine: une nouvelle génération de romanciers africains à Paris* (2003) she reproduces much of the same text from her article in order to build upon her argument about Beyala's humorous subversion of stereotypes. This time, however, the nuances she added to Rosello's strategies of 'declining' are absent from the analysis. Instead, Cazenave endorses fully Rosello's arguments:

> Beyala effectue un travail de décentrement à partir de la langue et de la manipulation humoristique des stéréotypes et expressions idiomatiques faisant partie intégrante de la langue française. Une partie de l'effet humoristique tient à l'éclatement de certaines expressions considérées comme idiomatiques parce que faisant partie intégrante de la langue, mais qui, analysées dans le détail du contexte de la parole, laissent paraître une composante stéréotypique [...] Mireille Rosello démontre dans *Declining the Stereotypes* (sic). *Ethnicity and representation in French Culture* (1998) comment l'écrivain Calixthe Beyala dans *Le petit prince de Belleville* (sic), 'Cheating on stereotypes' [Triche sur les stéréotypes] a su les subvertir, créant un effet de surprise là où, d'après la nature même du stéréotype, on s'attend à un phénomène de répétition.[22]

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20 Cazenave, 'Calixthe Beyala's "Parisian Novels"', p. 122. This is in reference to Béatrice-Rangira Gallimore's description of *Assèze l'Africaine* as having 'une couleur locale' in *L'Œuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala: le renouveau de l'écriture féminine en Afrique francophone sub-saharienne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), p. 175.
21 Cazenave, 'Calixthe Beyala's "Parisian Novels"', p. 123.
22 Odile Cazenave, *Afrique sur Seine: une nouvelle génération de romanciers africains à Paris* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), p. 107.

Cazenave goes on to reinforce the idea that repeating stereotypes with a difference somehow undermines them by insisting that 'le déplacement des expressions et l'effet surprise par l'irruption d'un mot inattendu, fait éclater le stéréotype'.[23] She also insists that Beyala is not alone amongst postcolonial writers in taking up this strategic use of ironic repetition, since apparently 'le recours à l'éclatement des expressions idiomatiques et des stéréotypes' is a tactic found in the work of many young writers of the African diaspora.[24]

Cazenave's collaborative work with Patricia Célérier entitled *Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment* (2011) returns to examine this new wave of rebellious postcolonial authors. Cazenave and Célérier discuss the subversive impact of comic writing by contemporary postcolonial authors as if it were something of a foregone conclusion when they mention in passing the idea that humour and irony can undermine clichés:

> Women writers such as Beyala, Bessora, and Diome have used humor and irony, subverting stereotypical representations of the African immigrant, even if, arguably, in the case of Beyala for instance, her works have also participated in a certain 'folklorization' of the African immigrant community.[25]

It seems worth noting that the statement above appears in the context of an attempt to gauge the 'most' subversive of the three writers selected and, for the record, according to Cazenave and Célérier it is Bessora who triumphs since 'Compared with the books by other African women writers currently living in France, such as Beyala's or Diome's, Bessora's novels are more subversive because they exoticize the "Franco-French" to ironically deconstruct the exoticization of the "others" of French society'.[26]

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23 Cazenave, *Afrique sur Seine*, pp. 111–112.
24 Cazenave, *Afrique sur Seine*, p. 113.
25 Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier, *Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 118.
26 Cazenave and Célérier, *Contemporary Francophone African Writers*, p. 118.

The type of vocabulary used by Cazenave to discuss the impact of humour on stereotypes (i.e. 'éclatement' or 'shattering' and 'ironic deconstruction') reappears in descriptions of Dany Laferrière's novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985). According to the official website of the *Académie Française* – an institution of which Laferrière became a member in 2013 – Laferrière's first novel 'exploded' onto the literary scene: 'Paraît, en 1985, le roman *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer,* qui explose dans le ciel littéraire du Québec'.[27] Using similar terms, André Lamontagne describes Laferrière's treatment of stereotypes in *Comment faire* as 'une écriture explosive qui joue des clichés et de la stéréotypie'. Lamontagne concludes this line of argument, unsurprisingly, with the assertion that Laferrière's text 'démonte la construction identitaire du sujet noir dans ses rapports avec le sujet blanc'.[28] Jana Evans Braziel uses almost identical terms to describe Laferrière's writing in her examination of Laferrière's 'textual, even humorous, resistance to racial-sexual stereotypes' when she describes how 'Laferrière's literary writings explode North American constructions of black masculinity […] I grapple with that explosion'.[29] In spite of the fact that she draws upon contemporary theoretical concepts, Braziel's analysis reconfirms the standard notion of parody as a subversive tool aimed at writing back to dominant discourses. She states that:

> Laferrière plays – excessively even – on these stereotypes in order to disrupt the entangled notions of race, masculinity, sexuality, and even nationality (or its framed manifestations) as transposed onto black male American bodies […] For Laferrière, the play on sexual-racial stereotypes in excess offers a way of satirically or textually unloading their potency (quite literally); Laferrière re-appropriates the images and representations of black masculinity in

27 'Dany Laferrière' <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/les-immortels/dany-laferriere> [accessed 18 January 2016].
28 André Lamontagne, *Le Roman québécois contemporain. Les voix sous les mots* (Quebec: Éditions Fides, 2004), p. 17.
29 Jana Evans Braziel, *Artists, Performers and Black Masculinity in the Haitian Diaspora* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 19.

> order to overwork, and thus disassemble, the machinic assemblages of American racial constructs.[30]

Braziel's comments about Laferrière's work's supposed engagement with the clichés proliferated by American culture sweep over the author's references to Canadian and Québécois society as a result of her attempt to mould the novel to fit her own political/critical agenda.[31] Her analysis is a good example of a tendency in some postcolonial criticism to under-contextualise literary works while overstating the importance of certain aspects of the author's biography in order to make their writing reflect preconceived ideas about the aims and effects of postcolonial fiction. This is an issue I will explore in more depth throughout the thesis.

The links between the notion of parodic humour and claims about its explosive repercussions can be traced back to another key postcolonial theory that appeared during the late 1980s and that framed parody as a rebellious weapon: Homi K. Bhabha's concept of mimicry. Bhabha's fullest explanation of this theory appears in a chapter entitled 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' in *The Location of Culture* (1994).[32] In the latter volume Bhabha elucidated his theory of the ambivalence of colonial discourse and described mimicry as a particularly 'elusive and effective' strategy of colonial power, asserting that 'the epic intention of the civilizing mission [...] often produces a text rich in the traditions of *trompe-l'œil*, irony, mimicry and repetition'.[33] Essentially, Bhabha's argument is that mimicry produces 'a subject of difference that is almost the same but not quite' and which unveils the tenuousness of the coloniser's claims to superiority.[34] On the

30 Braziel, p. 37.
31 For a helpful analysis of the references to Quebec in Laferrière's text see Piotr Sadkowski, 'L'Écrivain « Transaméricain » se met en scène québécoise ou *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* de Dany Laferrière', in *Parcours québécois: introduction à la littérature du Québec*, ed. by Pierre Morel (Bucharest: Editura Cartier, 2007), 156–166 (pp. 162–164).
32 A version of this chapter first appeared under the same title in the journal *October* in 1984. See Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28 (1984), 125–133.
33 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 122.
34 Bhabha, p. 86.

borderline with mockery, mimicry is also 'menacing' due to its ability to disrupt the foundations of authoritative colonial discourse.

Bhabha's work was criticised on several fronts by a number of postcolonial scholars who found his textual explanations and arguments about postcolonial resistance at odds with the type of urgent political and social situations associated with postcolonial studies.[35] Nonetheless, if some critics have called into question the viability of Bhabha's theories in light of the disjuncture between his text-based analysis and the material reality of postcolonial contexts, others have positively embraced Bhabha's concept of mimicry in order to support arguments about the resistance offered by parodic postcolonial cultures. We can find examples of this in a number of articles that draw upon colonial mimicry in examinations of postcolonial phenomena such as La Sape, a fashion movement that I will return to in Chapter 1. Bhabha's notion of mimicry also appears in analysis of some of the literature that I will examine in this thesis. For instance, in her 2006 monograph on Calixthe Beyala's œuvre Nicki Hitchcott draws upon innovative concepts of performative parody elucidated in feminist and queer theory in her readings of Beyala's fiction. Ultimately, though, Hitchcott reaffirms the precedents laid out by Bhabha in his theory of mimicry. Like Coleman, Hitchcott is careful to underscore the fact that parody is potentially – although by no means *always* – subversive, but her examination nonetheless concludes with the idea that the author and her protagonists can be seen as colonial mimics.[36] In her defence of Beyala's works against charges of complicity, Hitchcott uses Bhabha's concept of mimicry to support the argument that what might appear to be submission is in fact subversion:

> By flaunting the exoticism of both herself and her characters, Beyala could indeed be read as a kind of postcolonial caricature, and Harrow is not the only one to suggest this. However, if we keep Butler's and Doane's performative figures in mind, it might be more useful to think about Beyala's masquerades in relation to the figures of the drag artist or

35 For example, see Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9, 1 (1987), pp. 27–58.
36 Nicki Hitchcott, *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 136.

> *femme fatale*, since both imply the imitative structure of identification. The difference, as we have already discussed, is that the *femme fatale*, like Bhabha's colonial mimic, represents both parody and subversion.[37]

Hitchcott's study is further evidence of the muddled way that postcolonial criticism has dealt with parody since certain key theories about the concept were put forward that emphasised the value of its subversive effect. It also attests to the extent to which an author's biographical context can shape literary-critical examinations of literary texts in postcolonial studies, which is an issue that I will explore through an analysis of self-parody in Chapter 3.

The extent to which foundational ideas about postcolonial parody continue to influence literary criticism comes to light when we consider examinations of postcolonial texts that explicitly draw upon postmodern theory. Rather than use postmodernism's perceived apoliticism to explore a different dimension of parodic humour, as I aim to do here, prior 'postmodern' readings of postcolonial parody still maintain classic arguments about the subversive capacity of parody to overturn dominant discourses. For instance, Anthony Purdy's article comparing Laferrière's work to that of another Canadian author, Régine Robin, asserts that Laferrière's postmodern style in *Comment faire* has the capacity to deconstruct clichés. In his conclusion to the analysis of Laferrière, Purdy states that: 'En effet, la *négriture* de Laferrière n'est pas la négritude engagée, politisée, de la décolonisation; c'est une négritude ludique, postmoderne, fondée moins sur la revendication que sur la déconstruction parodique des stéréotypes'.[38]

A similar argument can be discerned in Susan Ireland's article 'Bessora's Literary Ludics' from 2004. Ireland examines the comic techniques of Sandrine Bessora by identifying postmodern techniques in two of Bessora's best-known works: *53cm* (1999) and *Les Taches d'encre* (2000). Whilst pointing out postmodern devices such as metafiction and intertextuality, Ireland also makes statements that seem to have determined in advance the

37 Hitchcott, p. 120.
38 Anthony Purdy, 'Alterité, Authenticité, Universalité: Dany Laferrière et Régine Robin', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 23 (1992), 51–59 (p. 54).

resistant effect of Beyala's text. For instance, whilst Ireland does bring up the issue of parody's potential to be read at 'face value' – a concern that we have already seen emerge in other critical discussions of postcolonial parody and that essentially comes down to the issue of ironic expression's 'literal meaning' – in so doing she reveals the implicit assumption that Bessora's parody is intended as dissent.[39] She states that: 'Since Bessora's objective is to subvert discourses of the past, it is essential that her intention be recognised and that her use of literary devices such as irony not be taken seriously'.[40] Ireland contends that Bessora gets around this issue because of the 'extreme' nature of her playfulness, which 'ensures that her readers will not engage in a literal reading of her texts'[41] and she goes on to liken Bessora's textual play to Rosello's strategies for 'declining the stereotype'.[42] In other words, despite its innovative treatment of the various postmodern elements of these novels, the thrust of Ireland's argument is fairly conventional: Bessora's fiction is able to subvert received ideas as a result of the use of ironic repetition. For example, she states that: 'The parodic use of scientific terminology and the sudden shift in register from the erudite to the colloquial, along with the allusions to canonical anthropological texts, constitute a good illustration of the type of recontextualization and undermining of stereotypes used throughout the novel'.[43]

On the face of it, then, it seems that changes in the perception of postcolonial parody and challenges to foundational understandings of mimicry and 'writing back' have been only partially transformative in postcolonial critical thinking. Whilst there is evidence that a questioning of parody as a strategy of subversion and an acknowledgement of the problems involved with envisaging this style of writing as a form of contestation have already been put forward in assessments of postcolonial fiction, certain crucial assumptions about parody continue to sway analysis of this style of comedy. Furthermore, although claims of parody's subversiveness have been doubted by critics sensitive to the paradoxes of the style and

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39 For an interesting perspective on the problem of ironic expression's 'literal meaning' see Stanley Fish's rebuttal to Wayne Booth's notion of ironic stability in Stanley Fish, 'Short People Got No Reason to Live: Reading Irony', *Daedalus*, 112, 1 (1983), 175–191.
40 Susan Ireland, 'Bessora's Literary Ludics', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 68 (2004), 7–16 (p. 7).
41 Ireland, p. 8.
42 Ireland, p. 11.
43 Ireland, p. 12.

structure of parodic language, few examinations actually conceive of parody as *other than* a mode of contestation, and in many cases the resistant quality of this device is still prioritised.

So, perhaps another way of looking at the reception of postcolonial parody is to see the focus on subversion as a way of justifying the presence of humour in postcolonial contexts. We can see critics 'excusing' humour in analysis of writing by various contemporary postcolonial writers. For instance, Dominic Thomas justifies Faïza Guène's hilarious gags in her best-selling novel *Kiffe kiffe demain* (2004) on the grounds that it is the author's use of comic techniques that enables her to deal with racial and social issues. He asserts that 'it is this playfulness, irony and judicious use of humor that allows Guène to tackle the multifaceted social issues that confront the *banlieue*'.[44] Thomas's explanation of Guène's comic techniques as a vehicle for her social commentary reveals an effort to locate a political incentive or rationale 'behind' the comic language. Another example of this appears in the introductory paragraphs of Maria Fernanda Arentsen's article on Laferrière's use of stereotypes in *Comment faire*, in which she states that the aim of her analysis is to 'comprendre comment et jusqu'à quel point la parole migrante déployée par Dany Laferrière dans *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*, réussit ou échoue à subvertir la cuirasse des lieux communs et des images toutes faites'.[45] Likewise, Nadra Lajri's comparative analysis of texts by Alain Mabanckou and Azouz Begag underscores how humorous techniques do not preclude the idea that the authors' texts have a critical intent, namely that of calling into question racial clichés:

> L'humour dont nous allons relever quelques aspects est pluridimensionnel; les deux écrivains s'adonnent à un jeu sur les mots, à un mélange des (sic) figures alliant la syllepse et son jeu sur les sens propre et figuré des termes à l'antiphrase, passant allègrement de la parodie à l'aspect plus burlesque des discours absurdes, déclinant un détachement de la

44 Dominic Thomas, *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 200.
45 Maria Fernanda Arentsen, 'Le rôle – complexe – des stéréotypes dans le discours du narrateur migrant de *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 79 (2007), 93–110 (p. 94).

> réalité dont ils s'amusent tout en ne renonçant pas à un non-dit critique et moralisateur lisible en filigrane dans l'œuvre qui remet en question des discours stéréotypés sur le monde des immigrés dans les pays anciennement colonisateurs.[46]

A similar reflex appears in an article about Mabanckou's 'trickster strategies' by Pascale de Souza, in which de Souza cites three reactions to the novel *Black Bazar* (2009) from the French press, all of which highlight the author's comic edge:

> Des cocasseries de la fiction aux vraies questions. Le nouveau Mabanckou appartient à cette catégorie, si rare, des livres drôles et intelligents. Un propos dont le sérieux est enrobé dans une prose savoureuse, très inventive! (Martin)

> Alain Mabanckou, Prix Renaudot 2006 pour *Mémoires de Porc-épic*, a choisi de privilégier le registre de l'humour et de l'autodérision, qui lui permet d'offrir au lecteur un point de vue à la fois amusé et distancié. (Gauvin)

> Un roman drôle et intelligent sur la communauté noire parisienne ultradandy et qui, mine de rien, sous des airs de farce burlesque et pathétique, donne à réfléchir sur bien des conventions et idées reçues. (De Tily)[47]

The conclusion that de Souza draws from these reviews likens Mabanckou's writing to a style of parodic borrowing known as 'signifying' that was conceptualised by American scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr in 1988.[48] Essentially, de Souza asserts that Mabanckou's humour constitutes an attempt to engage with social concerns. In reference to the above excerpts, de Souza states: 'As these three quotes suggest, Mabanckou's humour and inventiveness with

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46 Nadra Lajri, 'L'Humour dans les romans d'Alain Mabanckou et Azouz Begag: de l'autodérision à la singularité', *Études littéraires*, 43, 1 (2012), 63–72 (p. 66).
47 Pascale de Souza, 'Trickster Strategies in Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar*', *Research in African Literatures*, 42, 1 (2011), 102–119 (pp. 112 –113).
48 Henry Louis Gates Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988).

language are in fact Signifyin(g) processes aimed at addressing complex societal issues'.[49] And, arguing along similar lines, John Walsh describes Mabanckou's novel *Verre cassé* (2005) as a 'parody of literary politics' that also 'satirizes the bind in which "Francophone" writers find themselves'.[50] Walsh's analysis emphasises the 'critical' capacity of parody by maintaining that whilst Mabanckou's parodic intent is 'obvious', the narrator's derision 'leaves the reader with the feeling that a more serious accusation may be at work'.[51] I will deal with the critical reflex to excuse parody in more detail in Chapter 1, where part of my analysis of La Sape and its representation in Mabanckou's fiction will address how critics sometimes use a blurring between parody and satire to uphold a view of postcolonial cultures as systematically politically resistant.

What I hope to have illustrated by this point, then, is that even if parody's potential as oppositional counter-discourse has been called into question to a certain extent, it seems that establishing a sense of parody's resistant effect is still an important part of postcolonial analysis of this device. As I have already mentioned, examinations of postcolonial parody that argue along these lines are not necessarily invalid on every occasion, but in the case of the authors that I will examine here, a closer look at the claims about their parodic writings' subversion reveals that often arguments of this nature rely upon assumptions about the author's intentions and the reader's reactions to texts that are based on a fairly selective and speculative use of contextual information. The bottom line, then, is that equating parody – and humour more generally – with the notion of subversion has been the predominant stance on this topic in postcolonial studies, and it is only very recently that new paths have begun to be forged that mark more of a decisive turn away from this perspective.

New Possibilities for Postcolonial Parody?

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49 Pascale de Souza, 'Trickster Strategies in Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar*', pp. 112 –113.
50 John Walsh, 'Sarkozy, Mabanckou, and Notes from the Bar: Alain Mabanckou's *Verre cassé*', *The French Review*, 84, 1 (2010), 127–139 (p. 136).
51 Walsh, p. 130.

My work in this thesis positions itself in line with a recent trend in postcolonial studies that seeks to reconsider comedy in postcolonial cultural production using alternative frameworks of interpretation. Some of the most innovative of these studies have appeared as part of a number of collective works bringing together essays on humour and laughter from a wide range of postcolonial contexts. International in scope, these volumes take into consideration a plethora of different comic techniques – amongst which parody. Some examples are: *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial* (2005), *Laughter and Power* (2006), *Hybrid Humour: Comedy in Transcultural Perspectives* (2010), and *Le Rire européen: échanges et confrontations* (2010). Some of these compilations of essays explicitly attempt to distance themselves from understandings of postcolonial humour as a type of oppositional strategy. For instance, the editors of *Cheeky Fictions*, Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, make plain in their introduction to the volume that they hope to find alternative angles from which to approach postcolonial comedy. They point out that sustained engagement with comedy in postcolonial criticism is strikingly rare and that 'Quite predictably, what little work on humour exists can be subsumed under an *interventionist stance* – for most postcolonial critique is concerned with theorizing engagement, with analyzing agency for the marginalized and, in some quarters, even with *creating* agency'.[52]

Further evidence of a concerted effort to move away from an emphasis on the satirical and seditious aspects of humour can be found in *Le Rire européen*. In their essay 'Something to Laugh About? Representations of Europe in Francophone African Cinema and Literature, 1954–74', David Murphy and Aedín Ní Loingsigh argue that postcolonial criticism has thus far failed to think beyond the notion of humour as a political strategy, asserting that:

> Criticism of work by African filmmakers and writers has identified the subversion of colonial stereotyping through the use of irony and satire as key strategies of postcolonial

52 Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, 'Introduction', in *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial*, ed. by Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 1–23 (p. 2).

> African narratives but there has been little sustained analysis of this work as a specifically comic vision of postcolonial relations.[53]

In their analysis, Murphy and Loingsigh introduce the concept of 'shared laughter' as a new framework with which to analyse comedy in postcolonial texts. They suggest that 'shared laughter' is a way of bringing together groups from across cultural divides and argue that the use of laughter to undermine received ideas about race and colonialism can be seen as the first stage in the process of creating a '"shared" vision of the colonial project and its aftermath'.[54] In this way the concept of 'shared laughter' marks a departure from conventional readings of postcolonial humour as a threatening and rebellious tool. By foregrounding the different types of humorous experience that postcolonial parody can generate, this project would like to situate itself in this recent initiative to try to reconceive of comedy in postcolonial cultures in a new light.

My use of postmodern conceptualisations of parody in this thesis is not part of an effort to categorise the texts in my corpus as either postmodern or postcolonial, which, to quote Koffi Anyinefa, is a question that holds no importance.[55] Rather, I would like to use postmodern theories as way of bringing to the fore a sense of the wide-ranging comic effects that parody can produce. The postmodern concepts of parody that I will refer to in my analysis are therefore not confined to the work of a single theorist: in the following chapters, I draw upon a range of different, sometimes even contradictory, conceptualisations of this device in order to demonstrate how the texts in question present a range of parodic techniques. Clearly, conceptualisations of textual devices such as parody are constantly being revisited and revised: my work seeks to take advantage of the lively debates and innovations surrounding parodic expression in my readings of the primary texts in my corpus by drawing

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53 David Murphy and Aedín Ní Loingsigh, 'Something to Laugh About? Representations of Europe in Francophone African Cinema and Literature, 1954–74' in *Le Rire européen: échanges et confrontations*, ed. by Anne Chamayou and Alistair B. Duncan (Perpignan: Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2010), 349–364 (p. 350).
54 David Murphy and Aedín Ní Loingsigh, pp. 363–364.
55 Koffi Anyinefa, 'Postcolonial Postmodernity in Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire*', in *The Postcolonial Condition of African Literature*, ed. by Daniel Glover, John Conteh-Morgan and Jane Bryce (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2000), 5–22 (p. 19).

upon an assortment of different notions of parody that have not yet been applied to analysis of writing by the authors under consideration here.

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In the following chapters, I will focus on four different aspects of parodic expression: there are chapters on irony, intertextuality, reflexivity, and mock-documentary. In the first chapter on irony, the central argument contends that two interacting forms of comic technique are at work in Mabanckou's portrayal of the fashion movement known as La Sape: parody and irony. The first comic 'layer' that I will focus on is the Sapeur parody of European style. I argue that the Sapeur adaptation of European clothing can be considered a type of postmodern parody insofar as it fits the criterion laid out by Linda Hutcheon of a type of parody that 'intends no disrepect, while it does signal ironic difference'.[56] The conception of La Sape as parody nevertheless becomes problematic in certain critical appraisals of the movement when the term parody is used to describe the phenomenon and imply that it is politically motivated reappropriation, which conflates parody and satire. In the second part of this chapter, I examine the second 'layer' of comic technique perceptible in Mabanckou's depiction of Sapeurs, irony, in order to uphold a view of La Sape as a form of postmodern parody by showing how the author's irony calls into question the supposedly subversive political motives of Sapeurs. Reading through a comic lens rather than a purely 'postcolonial' one brings to light the way three of Mabanckou's texts – *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* (1998), *Black Bazar* (2009), and *Tais-toi et meurs* (2012) – offer a depiction of La Sape that seems to debunk claims of the movement's supposedly 'counter-hegemonic' resistance that continue to be privileged in critical discussions of this transnational culture.

Chapter 2 on intertextuality examines the intertextual references in two novels by Alain Mabanckou. I argue that the author's style of referencing other authors in his novels *Black Bazar* (2009) and *Verre cassé* (2005) can be understood as a postmodern play with

56 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 10.

textuality that generates three different types of fun for the reader: games, nonsense and farce. This chapter is divided into three parts, the first dealing with Mabanckou's textual playfulness which I argue creates a reaction comparable to the 'delight of recognition' that Mary Orr describes as being associated with Michel Riffaterre's concept of intertextuality, particularly for the reader who recognises the rules of Mabanckou's intertextual games. In the second part of the chapter on nonsense, I apply Deleuze's understanding of humour as an interrelation of textual surfaces to Mabanckou's writing in order to explore how, with or without the reader's recognition, the author's intertextual references still create a sense of levity. Finally, in the third section of the chapter I draw upon Fredric Jameson's concept of pastiche in a close reading of two episodes in Mabanckou's texts. By conceiving of Mabanckou's intertextuality using three different conceptualisations of parodic intertextuality, I will investigate the uplifting sense of levity that this device can create for the reader, shedding light on a problematically 'light' side-effect of parody that has only very recently received attention in postcolonial analysis.

Chapter 3 is the first of my comparative chapters that moves from an exclusive focus on Mabanckou's fictional writing to examine Mabanckou's texts alongside the works of the two other authors in my corpus: Beyala and Laferrière. The emphasis in this chapter is on these writers' uses of reflexivity and the ways in which they use different self-parodic techniques to create ironic repetitions of their own image as 'postcolonial authors'. By examining Mabanckou's *Black Bazar* (2009) together with Laferrière's *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) and *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008), I try to tease out the differences between the approach of these authors to self-representation and Beyala's self-parody in the media and in her self-reflexive text *L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel* (2007). Through an examination of these works, I aim to elucidate the way that postcolonial authors are understood as 'representative' of a culture, and to suggest that literary self-parody is an important channel through which celebrity postcolonial writers poke fun at this status.

In Chapter 4, I analyse what I am calling 'mockumentary fiction', which is to say a type of mock-documentary parody that I will examine in four novels: *Black Bazar* and

Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer, Laferrière's *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit ?* (1993) and Beyala's *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine* (2000). In a continuation of the theme of 'awkwardness' that I touched upon in Chapter 3, in my final chapter I will explore how Beyala, Mabanckou and Laferrière all create a specifically 'awkward' type of humour through their use of a faux documentary style of writing that is designed to make their readers feel uncomfortable. My argument in this chapter is based on a somewhat unorthodox methodological framework, since I draw upon ideas from film theory in order to demonstrate two different ways that these authors generate 'cringe comedy' through their ironic repetition of racial stereotypes.

One of my objectives in the rest of this thesis is to build upon the recent initiatives in postcolonial criticism that seek to reconsider the aims and effects of postcolonial comic devices by drawing comparisons between the parodic texts by the writer of 'mad, bad, fiction'[57] Alain Mabanckou, the 'incendiary apostate'[58] Calixthe Beyala, and Dany Laferrière, author of a 'succès de scandale'.[59] My primary aim, as I have already indicated, is to show that these authors' parodic writings cannot be confined by arguments that reduce their humour to political resistance; to use postmodern theories to shine a light on different types of enjoyable experience generated by reading these works; and to draw attention to the heretofore undervalued pleasurable dimension of postcolonial parody. And in this way, my work also aims to engage with a wider debate in literary criticism regarding the way that we as literary critics regularly justify our activities. This is an issue that I will return to in the conclusion with reference to Rita Felski's illuminating texts on our 'uses' of literature and the valorisation of certain modes and moods of literary criticism. Although Felski is not a postcolonial critic, her claim that 'We can only rationalize our love of works of art, it seems,

57 'Prince of the Absurd. The Mad, Bad Fiction of Congo's Alain Mabanckou', *The Economist* (London, 7 July 2011) <http://www.economist.com/node/18925807> [accessed 16 January 2016].
58 Augustine H. Asaah, 'Subversion and indeterminacy in Calixthe Beyala's *The Sun Hath Looked upon me*', *Legon Journal of Humanities*, 13 (2003), 1–30 (p. 9).
59 Maya Jaggi, 'Dany Laferrière: A Life in Books', *Guardian* (London, 1 February 2013) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/01/dany-laferriere-life-in-books> [accessed 23 January 2016].

by proving that they are engaged in critique – even if unwittingly and unknowingly'[60] resonates with the arguments that I will make in the rest of this thesis about the limitations of certain interpretive strategies used to make sense of humour in works of postcolonial fiction.

60 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 16.

Chapter 1

Sartorial Subversion? La Sape's Postmodern Parody

Il s'est arrêté devant la vitrine, intéressé par un costume vert électrique et s'est retourné vers moi avec un sourire dont je ne pouvais dire s'il était sincère ou moqueur.[1]

Unofficially, La Sape began in 1965 when a Congolese man named Christian Loubaki started work as a domestic employee in Paris. Now a legendary figure amongst Sapeurs, Loubaki collected the clothes his employer no longer had use for, gradually amassing a range of garments and wearing them on walks around the city. Before leaving the house on one such occasion, Loubaki's employer allegedly uttered to him these words of warning: 'habillé ainsi, tu vas saper le moral de tes amis'. Intended presumably to caution Loubaki against the jealousy of his friends, the young man is supposed to have mistaken the remark as a compliment and sauntered off, convinced that upon return to Congo he would be 'l'homme le mieux *sapé* de Brazzaville'.[2] According to reports published in 2013, Loubaki, the pre-eminent Sapeur also known as 'L'Enfant Mystère' to members of La Sape, was discovered drowned in the Seine near Argenteuil in 2010.[3]

Sapeurs in Paris and Congo mourned the macabre and suitably enigmatic end to the life of its 'Mysterious Child'. The latter's alleged mistaking of the French verb 'saper',

1 Alain Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs* (Paris: La Branche, 2012), p. 28.
2 See Abdellah Semata, 'La Sape' (2 January 2014) <http://manandmode.com/2014/01/02/la-s-a-p-e/> [accessed 20 December 2015]; and Nicolas Coutain, 'Insolite: les sapeurs congolais super stars grâce à Guinness!' (14 January 2014) <http://www.africatopsuccess.com/2014/01/14/insolite-les-sapeurs-congolais-super-stars-grace-a-guinness/> [accessed 20 June 2014]; and Assanatou Baldé, 'Enfantmystère: la révélation de la culture congolaise' (9 January 2012) <http://www.afrik.com/musik/article24472.html> [accessed 20 June 2014].
3 Bedel Baouna, 'Le corps de Christian Loubaki dit "L'enfant mystère" a été identifié' (8 October 2013) <http://www.congopage.com/Le-corps-de-Christian-Loubaki-dit> [accessed 21 June 2014].

meaning to undermine or demoralise, with the colloquial term for being well-dressed ('se saper'), is often omitted from official accounts of the origins of the movement. Instead, the word 'Sape' is described as an acronym of *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*, which is usually translated as either the 'Society for the Advancement of Elegant People' or the 'Society of *Ambianceurs* and Persons of Elegance'.[4] Rather than reference Loubaki's confusion of the French homonym 'saper', the term 'Sape' is typically presented as a deliberate reappropriation of the French language by members of the movement.[5]

La Sape's murky beginnings will come up again later in this chapter, since the lack of any concrete knowledge about how La Sape began complicates the movement's categorisation as parody. Today, the label 'La Sape' refers to a group known as Sapeurs, who form a predominantly male organisation. Members of La Sape usually dress in brightly coloured expensive clothes made of high-quality materials and produced by designer brands. In Sapeur terms, this obsessive idolisation of fashion is known as the 'cult of labels'.[6] The Sapeur preoccupation with designer labels produces a surprisingly eclectic style that has the paradoxical attribute of being simultaneously distinctive and diverse. Appropriate Sapeur garments range from kilts and bowler hats to pinstriped trousers with braces and crocodile-skin shoes, and the movement or trend does not exclude garments such as pink trousers, yellow ties, and tartan blazers, which are also acceptable attire. Sapeur style can also be subdued and subtle but broadly speaking, the general idea of La Sape is to draw attention to oneself – or to 'make an entrance' – through the use of clothes and, to this end, Sapeurs maximise the visible: the colour of their garments and the outfit's accessories are often combined in a way that is deliberately ostentatious.

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4 Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 40.
5 Justin-Daniel Gandoulou, *Au Cœur de la Sape: Mœurs et Aventures de Congolais À Paris* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989), pp. 18–19.
6 Also known as the '*culte du griffe*'. Didier Gondola, 'Dream and Drama: The Search for Elegance Among Congolese Youth', *African Studies Review*, 42, 1 (1999), 23–48 (p. 31).

Despite the celebratory image of La Sape that has been projected in the media,[7] Sapeur culture has dangerous downsides. For instance, Sapeurs rely upon illegal trade, regularly resorting to sales on the black market. Some Sapeur traders also face the threat of arrest and deportation if they aren't in possession of residence papers, as Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga have noted in their study *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (2000).[8] Sapeurs also tend to propagate an idealised view of Paris in order to recruit new members on trips back to Congo during a period of the year known as *la descente*. In spite of – or perhaps because of – the risks involved, La Sape remains a thriving movement.

The iconic Sapeur 'look' is epitomised by a quirky handling of traditionally European garments such as suits, shirts, ties, and silk handkerchiefs, and it is precisely these ironic twists that distance the movement from the realm of imitation and align it with parody. On closer inspection, though, the term parody in this context often designates a certain politicised or resistant ethos. Whilst some Sapeurs perhaps do intend to undermine certain homogenising conventions of European fashion and authority through their participation in La Sape, this chapter will question the extent to which one can apply this argument to all participants in the movement. Frequently, the complexity of the phenomenon is glossed over in criticism of literary representations of La Sape, which tends to concentrate on the movement's association with hardships such as illegal immigration, criminal activity and the exploitation of young migrants. As Jaime Hanneken has pointed out, this is a reception that capitalises on the fact that La Sape is 'germane to some of the most popular topics of postcolonial studies, including migration and identity'.[9]

In this chapter, I aim to demonstrate how the dominant view of La Sape in Mabanckou's fiction has routinely resided within the confines of these more obviously

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7 A recent example would be the Guinness advert by AMV BBDO. 'Guinness – "Sapeurs" (AMV BBDO)', online video recording, YouTube (18 March 2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66HuFrMZWMo> [accessed 10 February 2015].
8 Janet MacGaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga, *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 27.
9 Jaime Hanneken, 'Mikilistes and Modernistas: Taking Paris to the "Second Degree"', *Comparative Literature*, 60 (2008), 370–388 (p. 371).

'postcolonial' themes, promoting La Sape as a counter-discursive strategy at times to the detriment of analysis of the texts in which it is represented and an understanding of the phenomenon itself. I would like to approach La Sape from a different perspective, one that looks beyond the phenomenon's applicability to certain ideas common in postcolonial criticism. To this end, in the first part of this chapter I will illustrate some of the problems involved with the way that La Sape has regularly been interpreted as a type of postcolonial mimicry, proposing instead to see it as a type of postmodern parody. The aim in the second half of this chapter is to consider how La Sape's parody is depicted in Mabanckou's writing, exploring how the author's irony interacts with La Sape in three of his novels: *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* (1998), *Black Bazar* (2009) and *Tais-toi et meurs* (2012).

La Sape as Postmodern Parody

As I mentioned earlier there is no consensus regarding when La Sape originated, but theories about the movement's starting point can be distilled into three schools of thought. The first highlights the influence of mass migration to Europe from the 1960s onwards. A number of studies refer to La Sape as a movement that began in the latter half of the last century, underscoring how the propagation of the Sapeur community coincides with the second wave of Congolese migration to France during this period.[10] This school of thought suggests that La Sape took its contemporary form with the start of its transnational consolidation in the late 1970s. Supporting this view is socio-cultural work on the political and economic factors that instigated a change in access to Europe from Africa in the 1970s, triggering the proliferation of clubs and bars in Kinshasa, Brazzaville and Paris. For instance, Janet Macgaffey and Rémy Bazenguissa-Ganga note that before the stringent 'Loi Pasqua' was passed in 1993 the relaxation of immigration restrictions by the French

10 Désiré Kazadi Wa Kabwe and Aurelia Segatti, 'Paradoxical Expressions of a Return to the Homeland: Music and Literature Among the Congolese (Zairean) Diaspora', in *New African Diasporas*, ed. by Khalid Koser (London: Routledge, 2003), 124–139 (p. 189).

Socialist government enabled large numbers of clandestine immigrants to be legalised, and this arguably gave La Sape the opportunity to develop into the fully-fledged movement that is known today.[11]

Another branch of scholars argue that European influence inspired and facilitated the movement's development before the era of decolonisation. For instance, Didier Gondola has suggested that colonialism constituted the turning point in the creation of Sapeur culture. Gondola states plainly that 'The origins of *La Sape*, as we know it today among Congolese youth, date to the first years of the colonial era'.[12] Justin-Daniel Gandoulou argues along similar lines that 'Le contact, par le biais de la colonisation, de la société congolaise traditionnelle avec le monde occidental, particulièrement avec la civilisation française, avait engendré un courant culturel d'un genre nouveau', and he goes on to argue explicitly that the values of La Sape 'ne relèvent pas d'une société congolaise traditionnelle'.[13]

On the contrary, other commentators have located the origins of La Sape before European intervention in Africa, suggesting it is a continuation of ancient Congolese practices. One example of critical work that takes this view is an historical examination by Phyllis Martin who, in *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (1995), suggests that the importance of clothing in Congo predates the colonial epoch. According to Martin, the increased accessibility to cloth after Africa's colonial encounter with Europeans was a crucial factor alongside the introduction of cotton to the continent, altering the styles worn in the Congolese city.[14] However, Martin also cites passages from Brazza's journal as evidence to suggest that the explorer's early experiences in Congo were with members of a society who valued appearance and clothing exceedingly highly, insinuating that the inclination to use clothing and other materials as markers of rank existed in Congolese culture long before its confrontation with colonial power.[15]

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11 MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga, p. 37.
12 Gondola, 'Dream and Drama', p. 27.
13 Gandoulou, *Au Cœur de la Sape*, p. 39.
14 Phyllis Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 156.
15 Martin, p. 163.

Jonathan Friedman puts forward another example of this line of argument in *Consumption and Identity* (1994). In an essay entitled 'The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty', Friedman makes bold claims regarding the historical continuity of La Sape. He draws a comparison between the consumption of consumer goods and the cannibalism practised in traditional Congolese warfare as evidence that Sapeurs seek to imbibe the power of their enemies through literal acts of consumption. Friedman also links La Sape to the concept of 'life force', insisting upon the menace that La Sape poses to what he calls the 'state-class' as a result of its parodic nature.[16] Loading the term parody with political potency, he suggests that 'The parody of elegance turns the sapeur into a delinquent, an intolerable sociopath, a danger to the very foundations of society'.[17]

Friedman's stance on La Sape arguably casts Sapeurs in a primitive light. Sasha Newell has noted this problem with Friedman's position in her work on analogous clothing phenomena in Ivory Coast. She highlights how Friedman's analysis neglects to consider the possibility that La Sape is, at least in some cases, a 'literal' attempt to appear Westernised, arguing that this exacerbates the problem of a 'dichotomous approach to cultural comparison'.[18] Similarly, James Ferguson's article 'Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the "New World Society"' troubles the view of La Sape as counter-hegemonic by recontextualising the movement in the cosmopolitan setting of contemporary urban life. Ferguson looks at what he calls the 'anthropology of imitation' to go beyond the idea of mimicry as it appears in Homi Bhabha's work and to suggest that, for anthropologists analysing the cultural dynamics of today's African cities, the binary that gives form to Bhabha's concept of colonial mimesis (i.e. the perception of a visible slippage between model and reproduction) no longer holds in the globalised environment of cultural

16 Jonathan Friedman, 'The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty', in *Consumption and Identity*, ed. by Jonathan Friedman (London and New York: Routledge, 2004 [1994]), 167–187 (p. 183).
17 Friedman, p. 183.
18 Sasha Newell, *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption and Citizenship in Côte D'Ivoire* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 18.

reproduction technologies and transnational cultures.[19] Ferguson questions the pertinence of this distinction in the contemporary climate by asking 'how does an approach to mimicry as "cultural resistance", as parody or appropriation by the colonized of the colonizer come to terms with the cultural politics of the post-colonial world?'.[20] He suggests that, thus far, the 'dominant anthropological solution to the embarrassment of African mimicry' has been to interpret colonial and postcolonial imitations of Europeans as 'some combination of parody and appropriation, insisting that such "mimesis" is in fact a gesture of resistance to colonialism'.[21] Ferguson's rebuttal to Friedman highlights the possibility that anthropological assessments of La Sape might have attempted to recuperate imitation as a practice that is both culturally authentic and politically resistant in order to avoid accusations of racism.

Essentially, Ferguson argues against viewing La Sape as parody as a result of the term's assumed synonymity with resistance, suggesting that this critical assigning of political motivation to Sapeur practice is done to ensure that 'anthropological otherness is salvaged, as what appears to be a practice of cultural assimilation is reclaimed as an appropriation of Western goods and signs within the terms of an "indigenous" cultural logic'.[22] It is for this reason that I think that theories put forward by Linda Hutcheon can provide a helpful framework for envisaging La Sape, since she advocates a reappraisal of parody in twentieth-century art forms that recognises how it has been transformed since the late nineteenth century.

Hutcheon's work on irony and parody stretches across a number of volumes and her theories are helpful here because they deal directly with the issue of the 'double' meaning of parodic expression. Hutcheon's analysis of contemporary parody stresses that parody works from within the system that it rails against, being a self-consciously complicit and self-

19 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 128.
20 James G. Ferguson, 'Of Mimicry and Membership: Africans and the "New World Society"', *Cultural Anthropology*, 17, 4 (2002), 551–569 (p. 554).
21 Ferguson, p. 554.
22 Ferguson, p. 554.

contradictory form of contestation.[23] This is not to say, though, that contestation is always the primary goal of parodic expression, a point that Hutcheon illustrates persuasively with references to examples from postmodern art and architecture. As part of her examination of what she calls 'historiographic metafiction', Hutcheon also stresses postmodern parody's neutral – even approving – style of ironically referencing the past. She argues that 'To parody is not to destroy the past; in fact to parody is both to enshrine the past and to question it'.[24]

Hutcheon's rearticulation of parody in contemporary contexts stresses that this style of borrowing should be understood more broadly in order to 'fit the needs of the art of our century – an art that implies an other and somewhat different concept of textual appropriation'.[25] She maintains that parody's function began to evolve in the eighteenth century as it developed from a 'malicious, denigrating vehicle of satire to a broader, extended form of textual appropriation'.[26] In Hutcheon's eyes, parody should have 'a more neutral definition of repetition with critical difference' that 'would allow for the range of intent and effect possible in modern parodic works'.[27] Although it might seem counter-intuitive, the word 'critical' in this context doesn't necessarily imply subversive intent but rather refers to the idea of an 'ironic distance' that distinguishes parodic repetition from imitation, as Hutcheon explains:

> Parody, then, in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive.[28]

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23 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. xiii.
24 Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 126.
25 Linda Hutcheon, 'Modern Parody and Bakhtin', in *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, ed. by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 87–103 (p. 92).
26 Hutcheon, 'Modern Parody and Bakhtin', p. 92.
27 Hutcheon, 'Modern Parody and Bakhtin', p. 98.
28 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 32.

Hutcheon insists that parody should no longer be considered antagonistic by default since in her eyes it is 'a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text'.[29] And in a further step towards opening up the concept of parody, Hutcheon also asserts that parody does not have to be confined to literature, since 'any codified form can, theoretically, be treated in terms of repetition with critical distance (Abastado 1976, 17; Morson 1981, 107), and not necessarily even in the same medium or genre'.[30]

This logic underpins her distinction between satire and parody, which is based on the idea that whilst parody has traditionally been a 'vehicle of satire', it plays a different role in contemporary art. In *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, Hutcheon clarifies how these two overlapping forms of comic expression can be distinguished from each other:

> While we need to expand the concept of parody to include the extended 'refunctioning' (as the Russian formalists called it) that is characteristic of the art of our time, we also need to restrict its focus in the sense that parody's 'target' text is always another work of art or, more generally, another form of coded discourse. I stress this basic fact throughout this book because even the best works on parody tend to confuse it with satire (Freund 1981, for instance), which, unlike parody, is both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention.[31]

Hutcheon's flexible theories about the practice of postmodern parody have proved popular in numerous areas of literary and cultural criticism. A number of postcolonial critics have cited Hutcheon's ideas of postmodern parody in their analysis of work by postcolonial authors, including, somewhat surprisingly, Helen Tiffin and Diana Brydon, who quote Hutcheon in passing in *Decolonising Fictions* (1993) when the authors note that 'The relation of the

29 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 6.
30 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 18.
31 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 16.

postcolonial text to its thematic ancestors is often parodic. As Linda Hutcheon points out, parody may be "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity"'.[32] In Anglophone criticism in particular, several English-language authors have already been the subject of articles and essays that examine their specifically postmodern comic style. Salman Rushdie is a case in point: in addition to Hutcheon's own arguments which repeatedly use Rushdie's work *Midnight's Children* (1981) to exemplify the cross-over between postmodern and postcolonial parody,[33] Andreas Höfele also explicitly draws upon postmodern concepts of parody to inform his arguments about Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988) in *Parody: Dimensions and Perspectives* (1997).[34] And it is not just Rushdie's works that have inspired reappraisals of parodic expression in Anglophone postcolonial fiction using postmodern ideas. We could also mention Mac Fenwick's insightful analysis of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (2006), as well as Ahmed Gamal's article on Tariq Ali's use of metafiction and Koffi Anyinefa's essay 'Postcolonial Postmodernity in Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire*', all of which draw upon Hutcheon's works in their respective examinations.[35]

Nevertheless, Hutcheon's ideas have also come under fire from critics who are less sanguine about postmodern parody's capacity to engage with political contexts. In the field of postcolonial studies, Hutcheon's theories have been criticised as a result of her efforts to underscore how parody constitutes an important point of convergence between postmodern and postcolonial schools of thought. Critics such as Stephen Slemon and Diana Brydon have chastised Hutcheon for what are in their eyes her misleading comments about the

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32 Helen Tiffin and Diana Brydon, *Decolonising Fictions* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1993), p. 89.
33 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 65–6, 68–9, 75–6; and Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 161–165.
34 Andreas Höfele, 'Parody in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*', in *Parody: Dimensions and Perspectives*, ed. by Beate Müller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 67–89.
35 Mac Fenwick, 'Realising Irony's Post/Colonial Promise: Global Sense and Local Meaning in *Things Fall Apart* and "Ruins of a Great House"', in *Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York, NY: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 99–114; Ahmed Gamal, 'Rewriting Strategies in Tariq Ali's Postcolonial Metaficiton', *Postcolonial Text*, 6, 4 (2011), 1–19; Koffi Anyinefa, 'Postcolonial Postmodernity in Henri Lopes's *Le Pleurer-rire*', in *The Postcolonial Condition of African Literature*, ed. by Daniel Glover, John Conteh-Morgan and Jane Bryce (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2000), 5–22.

applicability of postmodern and poststructuralist theories to feminist and postcolonial works.[36]

My own perspective is that Hutcheon's work is useful for highlighting the complexities of contemporary parodic practice. Using her criteria, then, my contention is that Sapeurs fulfil the prerequisite 'repetition with ironic critical difference' in a way that also involves the 'pluralistic and ironic absorption of conflicting codes' that coincides with her description of postmodern parodic art.[37] What I want to suggest, in other words, is that Hutcheon's hypothesis about postmodern parody captures the type of playful ironic twist and ambiguous recalling of historical influence that is epitomised by Sapeur style. By divorcing the notion of parody from the idea of politically or ideologically motivated subversion in line with Hutcheon's theory, we are better equipped to understand what she calls the 'range of intended ethos' that a postmodern parody such as La Sape encompasses.[38] Furthermore, we can see more clearly the type of assumptions that Friedman makes in his reading of La Sape that 'reveals' the supposedly underlying African practices at work in the phenomenon.[39]

The contested origins of La Sape encourage certain arguments about Sapeurs' contemporary motives, creating confusion between accounts that present the movement as a reaffirmation of pre-colonial tradition and those that suggest it is a direct engagement with the former colonial power. Whilst in some cases these arguments may offer significant insights, they are not necessarily applicable to all Sapeurs. Moreover, a Sapeur's motivations might not necessarily be either consistent or accurately reflected in representations of the movement. This becomes a problem in certain literary-critical examinations, as some critics draw upon the conclusions of socio-cultural research on La Sape to bolster their claims about fictional texts' subversive potential, which can lead to a

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36 Stephen Slemon, 'Modernism's Last Post', *ARIEL*, 20, 4 (1989) 3–17 (p. 7); and Diana Brydon, 'The White Inuit Speaks: Contamination as a Literary Strategy', in *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-colonialism and Post-modernism*, ed. by Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 191–202.
37 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody,* p. 114.
38 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, pp. 243–244.
39 Ferguson, p. 554.

slippage between the notions of satire and parody in assessments of the phenomenon's representation in literature.

Dominic Thomas's work on La Sape in *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (2007) is an important example of this type of interpretative stance. In a chapter that discusses both Mabanckou's work and Daniel Biyaoula's *L'Impasse* (1996), Thomas argues that La Sape is a counter-hegemonic practice and that Sapeurs endeavour to 'circulate outside of the matrices' of 'recuperated colonial hierarchies'.[40] Thomas maintains that this 'distantiation is intended to avoid stereotypes and projections traditionally attributed to colonized subjects and that survive today in France in characterizations of African immigrants'.[41] Thomas supports his claim with a reference to Mireille Rosello's *Declining The Stereotype: Ethnicity and Representation in French Cultures* (1998), which is puzzling, considering that in this work she argues that stereotypes can be 'recycled' through comic reappropriation rather than 'distanced' in the hope of circumventing them.[42] As I have mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Rosello develops interpreting strategies of 'declining' stereotypes that she insists counteract the negative consequences of circulating clichés in literature and film. She proposes to distinguish between stereotypes on the one hand and the ways in which they are used on the other in an effort to dispel the notion that the stereotype is an inevitably harmful mode of expression.[43] If the difference between these arguments is nuanced it is nevertheless fundamental, and therefore problematic for Thomas, if he hopes to convince his reader that La Sape seeks to avoid stereotypes rather than recuperate them.

Thomas's use of Rosello is indicative of his approach to La Sape more generally. He uses a wide range of socio-cultural contextual information alongside philosophical concepts to situate La Sape within a politicised framework. For example, in a similar move to Friedman, who also applied the concept of 'distinction' to La Sape, Thomas refers to

40 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 161.
41 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 161.
42 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 249.
43 Rosello, p. 31.

Pierre Bourdieu's 'strategies of self-presentation' and 'signs of distinction' in order to suggest that 'The adoption of alternative aesthetic codes presents itself as a symbolic gesture aimed at reclaiming power'.[44] Additionally, he draws upon Bhabha's theory of mimicry as a 'useful paradigm' in order to further align La Sape with the notion of subversion. Although he describes Bhabha's theory as 'useful', Thomas makes only two fleeting references to it, the first of which I have already mentioned (his claim that Bhabha's work on mimicry apparently provides a useful paradigm for exploring La Sape).[45] The second comes when he attempts to construct a link between La Sape and Bhabha's evocation of the 'problem of authority' inherent in mimicry through the identification of a shared lexicon. Thomas writes that 'Fashion, as evidenced in La Sape, introduces the vocabulary and accompanying signifiers that are "hegemony," "assimilation," "subversion," and "resistance" – effectively rejoining Bhabha's evocation of the "problem of authority" (Bhabha, 89)'.[46] Thomas asserts that these words are associated with both the concept of mimicry and the idea of fashion, and is apparently satisfied that this constitutes a sufficient basis upon which to argue that La Sape is synonymous with subversion. However, his effort to establish a semantic parallel between rebelliousness and fashion in order to imply that La Sape functions as an effective political statement fails to recognise the ways that Mabanckou's portrayal of La Sape appears to undermine these very associations.

Even if Thomas's idea is carried through to its logical conclusion and it is temporarily conceded that La Sape 'engages discursively and semiotically with dominant, hegemonic norms and standards, thereby inaugurating the space for a counter-hegemonic semiology', it is unclear whom exactly he believes is being engaged *with* on these grounds.[47] On the one hand, he is careful to link La Sape with colonial history and Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry, which relies upon the European coloniser as 'model'. In other words, Bhabha's theory relies upon a fixed and recognisable image of the coloniser to serve as the

44 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 161.
45 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 162.
46 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 163.
47 Thomas, *Black France*, pp. 163–164.

model for its mimetic imitation. On the other hand, when Thomas's argument extends suddenly to imply that La Sape's resistance is also directed against President Mobutu's *abacost*, it seems that there is an unwarranted political claim about the versatility and efficacy of Bhabha's theory that has no basis in Mabanckou's text.[48]

Despite the fact that Thomas never terms La Sape as a parodic practice, his emphasis on the parallels between La Sape and other forms of mimetic reappropriation present the Congolese phenomenon as a subversive act of imitation, and therefore what we may term a specifically satirical form of parody (or parody in the traditional sense). His attempt to incorporate Bhabha's views on mimicry into his framework of interpretation can be seen to attest to this. Here, the slippage between parody as Hutcheon describes it – as a multivalent and not necessarily resistant device – and the forms of intentionally subversive mimetic reappropriation that Bhabha enumerates as part of colonial mimicry emerges more clearly. This leads me to another aspect of Thomas's analysis that I find particularly unconvincing, which is how his arguments regarding the way that Mabanckou's work 'gains additional importance in the process of demystifying and countering the colonial project and the ongoing appeal of the idea of the metropole'[49] are underpinned primarily by contextual socio-cultural studies rather than textual analysis of Mabanckou's novels. Most problematically of all, his analysis does not address the ambiguities of mimetic resistance within the frameworks he discusses, which ultimately means that he fails to pick up on the humour with which Mabanckou portrays Sapeur practice.

I want to pursue this critique of Thomas with regard to his use of Mbembe's text *De la Postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (2000). Mbembe's work informs part of Thomas's argument in a way that appears to depart from Mbembe's original thesis. Essentially, Thomas uses a citation from Mbembe's work as

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48 The '*abacost'* is a shortened form of the slogan '*à bas le costume'* that became part of the political platform of Zairian president Mobutu in the 1970–80s as part of the concept of 'Authenticity'. C.f. Michela Wrong, 'A Question of Style', *Transition*, 80 (1999), 18–31; and 'The Emperor Mobutu', *Transition*, 81/82 (2000), 92–112; and Kenneth Lee Adelman, 'The Recourse to Authenticity and Negritude in Zaire', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 13, 1 (1975), 134–139.
49 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 171.

evidence of La Sape's subversive partial repetition of the image of the coloniser even though Mbembe's work suggests that humorous imitation risks being taken at face value and thus rendered impotent. Mbembe's discussion of examples of comic caricature underscores the futility of attempting to establish an author's subversive intent and highlights how comic reappropriation always risks being counter-productive. He maintains that 'La question de savoir si l'opération comique en postcolonie vise ou non une quelconque résistance, ou si elle manifeste, *a priori*, une opposition ou des sentiments d'hostilité à l'égard du pouvoir est donc pour le moins secondaire'.[50] Mbembe appears to question the worth, and indeed, capacity, of critical methodologies to establish conclusively the extent to which a text has succeeded in subverting authority with comic resistance. This is reiterated in a more explicit reference to the tradition of La Sape when Mbembe alludes to Gandoulou's *Dandies à Bacongo: le culte de l'élégance dans la société congolaise contemporaine* (1989) to suggest that movements like La Sape, by 'captant les signes et les langages officiels et les enfermant dans des idoles' nevertheless produce a result which 'n'est, strictement parlant, ni un surcroît de subordination, ni une montée de la résistance'.[51] By expanding upon the problems of parodic resistance, Mbembe links the difficulty of interpreting any language as univocal to the potentially damaging residual literal meaning of comic expression, which threatens to counteract any subversive quality that mockery may have. With the figure of the postcolonial *homo ludens* Mbembe underscores the type of ambiguity that characterises the environment of familiarity and domesticity of 'conviviality', suggesting that 'les éclats de l'hilarité ou de la raillerie populaires ne font que prendre le monde officiel au sérieux, c'est-à-dire tel qu'il est en réalité et tel qu'il se représente'.[52] The surface image of comic imitation *'tel qu'il se représente'* therefore always runs the risk of being taken 'seriously'.

50 Achille Mbembe, *De la Postcolonie. Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), p. 148.
51 Mbembe, p. 153.
52 Mbembe, p. 81.

In light of these comments, the way that Thomas uses a citation from the end of Mbembe's chapter 'Esthétique de la Vulgarité' is misleading. Thomas provides his reader with a citation from Mbembe's translated text:

> 'In the postcolony,' Mbembe observes, 'magnificence and the desire to shine are not the prerogative only of those who command. The people also want to be "honored["], to "shine"' and to take part in celebrations . . . in their desire for a certain majesty, the masses join in the madness and clothe themselves in cheap imitations of power to reproduce its epistemology' (Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 131–133).[53]

This is in fact a combination of two passages from Mbembe's text, the first half of the quotation appearing when Mbembe discusses the idea of '*désir de majesté'* in the postcolony, epitomised by the extravagance of official government ceremonies, the lavish feasts that are held after periods of religious fasting, the trend for high-quality clothing amongst the political elite in Cameroon, and the pomp of state funerals. The second part of Thomas's quotation is taken from a passage in Mbembe's work that occurs at the end of the chapter, when Mbembe concludes his argument regarding the need for a revised approach to contemporary postcolonial domination. Here, Mbembe describes the complete inversion of dress codes as part of his argument about the disintegration of visible binaries that formerly structured colonial and postcolonial relations and conventional postcolonial critical thinking.[54] Thus, Thomas's use of this quotation to provide a sense of the psychological motivation behind La Sape is deceptive, as it disguises the fact that Mbembe regards the use of imitation as a product of the type of intimate tyranny that characterises the contemporary postcolonial situation. In other words, he neglects to situate the citation within Mbembe's

53 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 163.
54 For the first half of this quotation, see Mbembe, p. 183: 'En postcolonie, la magnificence et le désir de briller ne sont donc pas le seul apanage de ceux qui commandent. L'envie d'être honoré, de briller et de festoyer est tout aussi présente chez les gens du commun'. For the second half, see p. 186: 'La véritable inversion a lieu lorsque, dans son désir de majesté, la plèbe entre en déraison et revêt les oripeaux du pouvoir pour mieux en reproduire l'épistémologie ; et lorsque le pouvoir, dans sa recherche violente de grandeur et de prestige, fait de la production de la vulgarité et de la délinquance son mode dominant d'être'.

theory of conviviality, which ultimately argues that the subversive nature of mimicked visions of authority can never be assured.

With 'conviviality' Mbembe challenges the efficiency of Bakhtinian parody, which posits a clear distinction between dominated and dominating groups.[55] Mbembe insinuates that the reliance upon a binary model of domination in Bakhtin can also be found in 'critique classique' under the auspices of 'logiques de résistance'. Taking issue with this conventional approach, Mbembe advocates a view of the postcolony as a 'pluralité chaotique' where it is 'pratiquement impossible d'enfermer signes, images et traces dans la fixité et l'inertie' and where the target of parody is constantly shifting.[56] As a result, he suggests that 'Il ne faut donc pas insister, ainsi que le fait Bakhtine, sur le dédoublement (ou, comme le fait la critique classique, sur de prétendues logiques de résistance, de désengagement ou de disjonction)'.[57] Instead of a dichotomous view of postcoloniality, then, Mbembe envisages a complex reciprocated imitation that blurs the boundary of the hegemony/counter-hegemony binary upon which the idea of subversive parody (or satiric imitation) is based. This is not to say that the notion of 'conviviality' eradicates the question of resistance simply by asserting its chaotic manifestations instead of its binary forms, as Michael Syrotinski has helpfully explained. Indeed, Mbembe is not 'trying to downplay the significance of the historical facts of colonialism, or of slavery, but he is interested in trying to articulate more clearly the particular forms of "entangled" subjectivity and temporality they have produced'.[58] Perhaps, then, Mbembe's critique of Bakhtin can be expanded to include Bhabha's theory of mimicry, which similarly relies upon a binary view of domination in order for the 'threat' of mimetic imitation to be perceived.

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55 Peter Hitchcock provides a lucid explanation of Mbembe's critique of Bakhtin and his specific problematisation of the Rabelaisian economy of difference that sets up a binary opposition of resistance between non-official and official discourse in *Oscillate Wildly: Space, Body and Spirit of Millennial Materialism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 82–83.
56 Mbembe, p. 148.
57 Mbembe, p. 152.
58 Michael Syrotinski, *Deconstruction and the Postcolonial: At the Limits of Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 102.

It is important to bear in mind the critical work outlined above as we turn to examine the second 'layer' of humour concerning La Sape: irony. Although Mbembe's work troubles a conventional conception of parody, his concept of conviviality has less of an impact on ironic language due to the fact that irony is antithetical, and it does not depend upon a model *per se* but rather the recognition of the opposite of its literal meaning. Whilst recognising the interdependency and overlapping nature of parody and irony, my schematic separation of these comic techniques permits a more focused assessment of the development of Mabanckou's style that would otherwise be occluded by his complex intermingling of comic devices. Using this stylistic division as a starting point, then, in the rest of this chapter I will investigate how Mabanckou generates humour in his early work through an ironic re-working of binaries of colonial domination, and by anecdotal observations of Sapeur confrontation with a Parisian public in his later novels. In this way, Mabanckou's ironic treatment of La Sape appears to evolve towards an increasingly animated portrait of postcolonial conviviality.

My first examples are drawn from Mabanckou's novel *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* (1998), which follows the story of its narrator Massala-Massala, alias Marcel Bonaventure, who is persuaded to give up his studies and migrate to Paris under the mentorship of Charles Moki. Massala-Massala discovers an entirely different Paris to the one he had been imagining and is manipulated into illegally procuring and selling metro tickets in order to pay off his debts to Moki. The novel begins with Massala-Massala recounting his arrest before a series of flashbacks unveil to the reader the full extent of his ordeal. Massala-Massala relates his treatment at the hands of two French police officers who ridicule his choice of clothing for the chilly climate of Parisian winter. Massala-Massala describes how recent snowfall made his feet 'humides, gelés et ankylosés', and that, since he was not wearing 'vêtements de saison', the two men watching him shiver in his t-shirt and jeans 's'en moquaient éperdument, parés de brodequins militaires, de lourds manteaux, de gants fourrés et de

bonnets qui couvraient leurs oreilles comme s'ils traversaient la Sibérie'.[59] Within the first few pages, then, the conventional colonial binary of dominator/dominated is inhabited and exaggerated by the discrepancy between the clothing of the officers and the immigrant, and it is this type of power relationship that Mabanckou inverts in the following examples.

Extended ironic engagement with the binaries of domination appears during an early episode in the novel in which the author reverses the twentieth-century colonial practice of exhibiting indigenous peoples in cultural expositions. This inversion occurs in the novel when Moki's *descente au pays* is described in what can be read as the portrait of a spoof Colonial Exhibition that is gradually constructed around one of Moki's annual visits home, during which he makes appearances talking about Paris and life as a Sapeur. Massala-Massala falls prey to the seductive narrative of Paris and participates in the village-wide excitement that Moki's impending arrival arouses in the weeks preceding the *descente*. Details of this anticipatory activity are provided to emphasise the care and attention given to staging and recreating the imagined French environment that Moki has supposedly grown accustomed to, appearing as part of the ironic inversion of the construction of 'authentic' indigenous habitats for the Colonial Zoos and Exhibitions in the early 1900s. For instance, a table is set in the open space outside Moki's father's house, ostensibly to give Moki a pleasant space to eat in, but Massala-Massala confides that the real reason is so that he can be scrutinised by passers-by: 'On installait une petite table en lianes sous le manguier, au milieu de la cour. C'est là que le Parisien prendrait ses repas. Il mangerait *à l'air libre*. En réalité, c'était pour qu'il prenne ses repas au vu et au su de tous'.[60] Mabanckou adds another comic touch to underscore the ironic tone of the scene and further challenge the 'rebellious' political associations of Sapeur style with the inclusion of the phonetic spelling of the name of Charles de Gaulle as 'Digol'. Moki's father parrots this mispronounced name with pride during his son's arrival in homage to the former leader. Moki's father is depicted as an object of ridicule as a result of his allegiance to La Sape as the elderly gentleman's attempt

59 Alain Mabanckou, *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1998), p. 20.
60 Mabanckou, *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge*, p. 51.

to flaunt his affiliations with Paris by only wearing European labels morphs him – unwittingly – into the blues singer John Lee Hooker.[61]

While the Colonial Exhibitions of the early 1930s showcased indigenous peoples from the French colonies and territories for the viewing pleasures of a Parisian public, in Mabanckou's ironic inversion Moki is transformed by his immersion in Parisian life into an 'authentic' Parisian clad in suit and tie for the viewing pleasures of a Congolese audience. The direction of the coloniser's gaze that once exoticised the native is here turned back on itself to highlight a Congolese quest for authentic 'Frenchness' and, in turn, a European readership's desire for authentic difference. Thomas notes that in this scene a 'symbolic reversal of the performative dimension of the Colonial Exhibition' takes place, but his analysis does not address the way this ironic representation undermines the argument that La Sape corrodes hegemonic French authority.[62] Mabanckou's ironic re-casting of the scene of a Colonial Exhibition draws attention to the way that Sapeurs uphold many of the hierarchical binaries promulgated by colonial discourse (centre/periphery, civilised/savage) by encouraging an idolisation of Paris and European fashion that reiterates clichés stemming from the colonial epoch. Taking Mabanckou's version into account, then, it seems that in their parodying of European style Sapeurs can be seen to replicate colonial models of French superiority. In other words, Mabanckou's comic treatment of colonial binaries opens up interpretation of La Sape to the possibility that the movement provides an outlet for a desire to conform to European models of behaviour, the implication being that La Sape is not necessarily motivated by anti-colonial sentiment.

Thomas also insists that during the scenes of his return to Congo, Moki's speeches about life in Paris are unanimously accepted by his audience when he asserts that 'Moki narrates a representation of Paris that he has constructed for his audience and to which they willingly subscribe, unquestioningly and without doubting his authority – he has assumed

61 Mabanckou, *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge*, p. 49.
62 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 180.

the position of insider with regard to the France in which he resides'.[63] Whilst for the most part this is true, Moki is challenged by an anonymous voice whose question signals a mocking doubtfulness about the veracity of Moki's claims. When the heckler calls out 'Donc le Tout-Paris te connaît?'[64] in response to one of the Sapeur's more outlandish statements, Moki reacts to this affront with a 'rire jaune' since 'On venait de douter de sa sincérité et de son règne'. He rebounds back into his position of superiority by mocking in turn 'le petit con qui a râlé dans le fond là-bas'.[65] Indeed, the potential mockery of the crowd is important to note, as it brings into focus the precariousness of Moki's position as superior and the superficial dimension to his acquisition of power in the postcolony.

As part of one of these speeches, Moki recounts his memory of a 'Sapeur showdown' that provides another example of ironic inversion. Moki relates one of the competitions that took place between rival Parisian Sapeurs in which clothes and accessories were worn and judged. Moki's resounding victory was ensured by his outfit, which featured an eclectic mix of symbols of Western authority including a colonial helmet, a priest's robe, and a Bible. As part of Moki's performance he read aloud from the Book of Revelation a passage from the 'Apocalypse de Jean', creating a pun that might have gone unnoticed without prior knowledge of the fact that denim is something of a taboo material amongst Sapeurs.[66] Moki's word play resides in the *double-entendre* of 'jean' meaning both denim – an 'antichrist' material for orthodox Sapeurs – and, of course, John the Apostle. Moki's use of the Bible, a book of colonial authority, demonstrates a linguistic play that is comical for its solemn warning of the impending destruction of 'jeans'. The pun also operates on another level, as further inspection reveals that Moki's choice of passage features the

63 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 181.
64 Mabanckou, *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge*, p. 73.
65 Mabanckou, *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge*, p. 75.
66 Denim is one of the distinguishing markers between a 'Sapeur complet' and a 'Sapeur Play Boy', the latter taking a more relaxed approach to La Sape, often wearing (designer) t-shirts and jeans. See blog by Oliver Thibaud, 'LA SAPE' (27 April 2015) <http://www.resonews.com/1145-la-sape/> [accessed 29 December 2015].

idolatress of Babylon, who was ostracised as a result of the bright reds, bold purples and glittering gold with which she adorned herself.[67]

While the pun could be construed as a re-working and undermining of the symbolic status of the Bible, and hence according to the 'logic of resistance', the symbolic status of the coloniser, I would suggest that Mabanckou is using irony to question the idea that Sapeur practice uses parody to subversively reappropriate colonial or even religious authority. On closer inspection, what wins the crowd's heart is not the threat that Moki poses to the former coloniser or even his inclusion of the colonial paraphernalia in his costume: it is for its originality, rather than any attempt to politically reinstate his outfit as a symbolic defiance of French or Christian authority.[68] This reading is supported by the fact that Moki's story climaxes – and the applause of the crowd erupts – when he relates how he humiliated his Sapeur adversary by displaying the reversibility of his cassock:

> « Je démontai soudain ma soutane en public puis la retournai. Et, comme dans un tour de magie, une autre soutane apparut en tissu écossais.
>
> L'habit était, en réalité, réversible. »
>
> À cette dernière phrase, Moki fut applaudi.[69]

The reversibility of Moki's cassock may be read metaphorically, and seen to imply the reversibility of the subversion/complicity binary that Mabanckou's ironic humour thrives on in this novel. Furthermore, the double-sided outfit could be read as a play upon Sapeur culture more generally, in the sense that the Sapeur embodies a dual 'authenticity'. In France, the Sapeur is a representative of Congo and his Sapeur style is an outward sign of affiliation with his Congolese heritage; however, in Congo, the Sapeur style is a way of

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67 'And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication. And upon her forehead was a name written a mystery: Babylon The Great, the mother of harlots and abominations of the Earth'. (King James Version reads 'prostitutes' not 'harlots'). Revelation, 17. 4–5.
68 Mabanckou, *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge*, p. 82.
69 Mabanckou, *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge*, p. 83.

indicating inculcation of Frenchness and associations with the French capital. Considering that the crux of Moki's story and the full weight of his win resides in the fact that his cape was reversible and defied his opponent's expectations, the colonial helmet that Moki adds to his ensemble works as a show-piece rather than a statement of either pro- or anti-colonial sentiment.

When Mabanckou depicts Parisian life again in *Black Bazar* (2009), his more confident protagonist Fessologue paints a mordant picture of the African diaspora. Fessologue's attempts to be taken seriously as a writer by his friends lead the reader through his relationship with his girlfriend Couleur d'origine and the breakdown of this partnership following her affair with Lucien Mitori, alias L'Hybride. Fessologue has a markedly more assertive narrative voice than Massala-Massala, owing perhaps to the fact that the novel begins with Fessologue already having established a life for himself in Paris, working at a printing factory whilst earning extra money trading in Sapeur clothes. In fact, Fessologue's inflated ego is part of his character's comic appeal, as his confidence is shaken on various occasions over the course of the narrative's trajectory. The following examples will illustrate how Mabanckou's comic portrait of this *bona fide* Sapeur reveals the risks involved with parody in the postcolony, and equally attest to the shift in Mabanckou's focus that increasingly addresses the complex 'conviviality' of contemporary postcolonial relations through the prism of La Sape.

In an early scene in *Black Bazar*, Fessologue's green Sapeur suit causes him to be mistakenly identified by members of the public as an employee of the national rail service at the time of an industrial strike. Fessologue's account of this moment ironises the idea of Sapeur subversion, firstly by revealing to the reader that he was dressing to impress – and *en route* to seduce – newly arrived female immigrants at a cousin's party. Then, having arrived at the station to find crowds of enraged commuters, Fessologue describes how he was flattered by the stares of onlookers gawking at him on the platform, and, thinking that they signalled admiration of his Sapeur appearance, he adjusted his trousers and jacket to put his

Christian Dior belt on display.[70] In fact, the French public was stunned by what appeared to be a man in an RATP uniform taking the metro in the midst of a rail services strike. As Fessologue had no intention of impersonating an official member of the French civil service he hardly registers the humiliating solecism, and when he finally understands, he is deeply embarrassed. Fessologue's naivety and self-absorption are offered to the reader in a *quid pro quo* that becomes even more humorous when he is pounced upon by a man demanding information about the trains.

As part of his account of the event, Fessologue openly mocks the received wisdom of the idiomatic French expression 'L'habit ne fait pas le moine' and ironically reinvests the supposedly superficial surface of the monastic habit with meaning: 'Mon œil!', he scoffs, 'Si l'habit ne fait pas le moine, c'est pourtant par l'habit qu'on reconnaît le moine'.[71] In this particular instance, however, the proverbial habit was not recognised at all. Mabanckou's play with the indeterminacies of recognition demonstrates how Fessologue's Sapeur identity is heavily dependent upon an awareness of La Sape that the French public apparently did not possess, and this serves to highlight the potential for misinterpretation in the contemporary Parisian environment. It seems important to note, too, that Fessologue was mistaken for an integrated member of Parisian society and assumed to be in a position of authority vis-à-vis the French public, adding another layer of 'convivial' complexity to this scene of proximity between postcolonial cultures.

Mabanckou's use of irony to develop a narrative that addresses the interaction between the African diaspora and the Parisian public reappears later in the novel. In a characteristically hyperbolic rant, Fessologue becomes incensed by the purchase that the colonial cliché of African 'rhythm' continues to have in French culture. He digresses into a tirade mocking the way that the traditional African garment called a *pagne* is used or rather has been 'left to white men' who wear it in an attempt to appear, as Fessologue puts it, 'pas

70 Alain Mabanckou, *Black Bazar* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), p. 48.
71 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 45.

du tout raciste pour un sou'.[72] Within the context of an increasingly fashionable European trend to adopt certain symbols of African exoticism, Fessologue bemoans the exploitation of clichés of Africans by Africans for a European audience willing to accept these stereotypes. His diatribe suggests that Europeans are aware of the reductive portrait of Africa that such clichés project but accept them in order to stifle African creativity and belittle African culture, calling into question the innocence and sincerity of 'cultural exchange':

> C'est quoi cette histoire de ramener le tam-tam aux pauvres Africains d'Afrique? Eux les Africains de là-bas ils s'en foutent désormais du tam-tam parce que c'est un truc qu'ils ont laissé aux Blancs qui vont prendre des cours pour ça, qui s'habillent en pagne pour faire local et qui sont tout contents parce qu'ils espèrent contribuer à l'intégration et à l'échange des cultures.[73]

According to Fessologue, then, when a European dresses in traditional African clothing it is viewed by Europeans in a positive way, as an act of open-minded curiosity and an acceptance of different cultures. Fessologue's sarcasm, despite itself being subject to ironic undercutting, underscores the unequal application of theories regarding the cultivation of individual or collective identity through fashion that underpin the Friedman school's interpretation of La Sape. In this way, Mabanckou's narrative draws attention to the type of dichotomous cultural comparison that sanctions an overdetermined interpretation of migrant culture.

Mabanckou increasingly attempts to shed light on the multiplicity of La Sape and the 'convivial' atmosphere in which contemporary transnational cultures develop. The narrative accumulates humorous confrontations between Fessologue in full Sapeur regalia and other members of the African diaspora. In one particular instance near the end of the novel, Fessologue defends himself against the accusations of a Gabonese man who mistakes his slicked-back hairstyle for attempted assimilation. His accuser's vitriolic condemnation is

72 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 126.
73 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 126.

full of clichés of black identity that contend that Fessologue's hair is proof that he is not assuming his 'negritude heritage' and shaming the 'black race':

> Un Gabonais qui traînait devant le McDonald's de la gare de l'Est m'a laissé entendre qu'en fait je n'étais qu'un type minable, que si je me défrisais les cheveux c'était parce que je n'assumais pas ma négritude, que j'avais un problème grave, que je faisais honte à la plus belle race du monde, celle qui est à l'origine de tout sur terre.[74]

After Fessologue justifies his actions to himself as self-affirming personal choices, he is heckled again: 'Le Gabonais a rajouté que je n'étais qu'un pauvre Noir qui n'aimait pas le manioc et que je me défrisais les cheveux pour ressembler aux Blancs'.[75] Clearly, the Gabonese man in this scene articulates the potential literal reading of the appearance of La Sape as submissive acculturation. With this antagonistic dialogue, Mabanckou points to essentialising interpretations of La Sape that produce a double-bind for the postcolonial African subject who cannot avoid being either complicit in the reproduction of certain clichés of African 'authenticity' or implicated by his adoption of French style clothing.

Mabanckou also addresses many of the themes from *Black Bazar* in *Tais-toi et meurs* (2012), presenting his reader with the portrait of a clownish and reluctant Sapeur, Julien Makambo. Julien betrays resemblances to the *commedia dell'arte* archetype of *Arlecchino* or Harlequin, who is obliged to act as the lesser duplicate or counterpart to Pedro, thus fulfilling in some sense the traditionally conceived role for Harlequin as a 'gentleman's valet'. The Harlequin's colourful outfit and childlike innocence correspond to the youthful, wide-eyed figure of Julien, who is framed for a murder that Pedro commits and eventually imprisoned in a way that may be read as symbolic 'suicide' or silencing.

The irony that characterises *Tais-toi et meurs* is notable from the outset, as the jaded narrator describes his detention in a French holding cell and notes how his surroundings

74 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 244.
75 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 245.

remind him of the studio he lived in with Pedro. As the narrative progresses and the details of the crime emerge, Julien 'the murderer' reveals that he is petrified of blood:

> Au restaurant, par exemple, je ne mange pas de viande saignante, je ne regarde même pas dans l'assiette de celui qui en mange, sinon j'aurais des vertiges et la nausée. Le ketchup, le jus de grenadine ou l'orange sanguine me retournent l'estomac.[76]

The irony of Julien's situation is therefore immediately brought to light and it is a thread running the length of the narrative, extending even to the name of the street in which Julien will live, the *rue de Paradis*.

More prominently than in his earlier works, Mabanckou's later depictions of La Sape shine a light on the chaotic nature of contemporary postcolonial relations in Paris. If, as Dominic Thomas suggests, interaction with other Africans in Paris brings with it 'a degree of relief' in *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge*, in *Tais-toi et meurs* the streets and other sites of diasporic interaction and interlocution are arenas of confrontation and conflict.[77] These spaces constitute areas of open rivalry between members of Africa's diverse diaspora where the only kind of relief provided is comic. Through the dialogues these meetings produce Mabanckou represents the Congolese community as fractured by (among other things) a notable difference in Sapeur style, particularly between the ethnic groups of the Bembé and the Lari. This rivalry is evidenced in *Black Bazar* when Fessologue calls the latter 'broussard' types and makes hyperbolic claims about their supposedly uncivilised society.[78] In *Tais-toi*, Mabanckou's writing is replete with examples of these types of comic dialogue during which characters take pleasure in deriding the other's appearance as they meet and mingle in the streets.

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76 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 15.
77 Thomas, *Black France*, p. 183.
78 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 52. For more information regarding the local and cultural tensions between tribes in Congo-Brazzaville see Rémy Bazenguissa and Janet MacGaffey, *Vivre et Briller à Paris: des jeunes Congolais et Zaïrois en marge de la légalité économique* (Paris: Karthala, 1995), pp. 124–133.

An example of this occurs in *Tais-toi* when Julien notices a group of men buying fake designer outfits. He smiles for the first time since the crime and jests that their attempts to rival real *Sapeurs* are futile: 'Ces frères de couleur croyaient-ils nous égaler, nous autres Sapeurs, en achetant des imitations Weston?'.[79] Julien is equally contemptuous of Sapeurs who are members of the Congolese community and derides what he considers to be the type of Sapeur without imagination or originality, describing a young man he sees in a yellow suit at *Château-Rouge* as 'une vraie caricature dans son genre'.[80] The irony is, of course, that Julien's obliviousness to his own caricaturing of the Sapeur 'genre' leaves him susceptible to the same remark by other Sapeurs – and the author. Mabanckou's play upon the idea of caricature and cliché draws attention to the internal mimesis of La Sape and the tension that fragments the Congolese diaspora, illuminating a type of *mise-en-abyme* calque of the Sapeur by the Sapeur that transforms the Sapeur into a farcical figure unable to escape the cyclical mimesis that denies him individuality. This is also illustrated in *Black Bazar* when Fessologue feels that he is distinguishing himself and creating his own style 'à contre-courant' by going against La Sape and dressing less ostentatiously.[81]

Another key element tying *Black Bazar* with *Tais-toi et meurs* is the reappearance of a troublesome green suit. Under the auspices of mentorship, Pedro pressures a begrudging Julien to wear an electric green suit when accompanying him to the *rue du Canada* – the site of the murder. The pair visits the legendary Sapeur store in Paris, *Les Connivances,* in order to buy the suit yet once there Julien inquires into the possibility of purchasing one in a more discreet colour, explaining that 'Je n'étais pas partant pour cette couleur qui aurait donné la migraine au chien d'appartement d'une vieille dame du 16^{e} arrondissement'.[82] The store's owner, Le Bachelor, immediately admonishes him for shying away from the bright colours of La Sape and launches into an angry tirade against what he terms 'colonisation sur le plan vestimentaire':

79 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 103.
80 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 139.
81 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, pp. 243–244.
82 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 28.

> – C'est pour ça qu'ils sont tristes et froids, ces Français ! Regardez-les dans la rue! C'est pitoyable! Vous vous rendez compte qu'ils portent du gris ou du noir 365 jours sur 365, et même plus quand c'est une année bissextile! Le vert électrique, mes frangins, c'est la couleur de la vie, de l'espérance, de l'optimisme [...] Toi, avec ton beau corps, tu ne dois pas hésiter, mon gars! Tu as peur de quoi? De ces ignorants de la mode, hein? Je suis convaincu que tu reviendras dans ma boutique pour d'autres couleurs! Et je t'informe au passage que tu n'as rien vu car j'ai du rose, du jaune, du rouge et du mauve dans ma réserve au sous-sol! Si tu ne prends pas ce costume, c'est que tu es encore sous la domination coloniale![83]

Le Bachelor's vitriolic speech links colour (or lack thereof) with colonialism, and his hyperbolic ranting comically ridicules the French penchant for greys and blacks. Mabanckou foregrounds the way that Le Bachelor manipulates the idea of postcolonial resistance in order to make a sale, as in the face of the enormous pressure of the spectre of colonial oppression, Julien acquiesces. Julien's helplessness is underscored when he admits that 'je ne voulais pas être vu comme un colonisé vestimentaire [...] J'étais comme une mouche dans un bol de lait'.[84] The analogy of a fly in a bowl of milk notably strips the Sapeur of any nobility or power and returns the colour spectrum to a black/white dichotomy. The commercial advantages of associating the idea of escaping colonial domination with purchasing highly expensive items is ironised by the suggestion that the movement's political connotations of rebellion and resistance mask the manipulation of Congolese youth for financial gain. What initially appears to be a reliance on binary postcolonial relations pitting the formerly dominated against the former dominators is revealed by Mabanckou's irony to be the exploitation of African men by their compatriots. It may seem counter-intuitive to associate the word conviviality with the (at times) exploitative nature of the interaction between and within immigrants groups, but arguably this example could be seen

83 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 29.
84 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 29.

to illustrate another version of the 'pluralité chaotique' to which Mbembe alluded in his analysis of convivial postcolonial relations.

The green suit will prove to be a constant source of embarrassment for Julien. When he returns home from the scene of the crime he is mortified by the fact that his neighbour both compliments him on his green suit and at the same time points toward his crotch. Since this is where Julien stuffed the wad of cash that Pedro gave him after the murder, the neighbour's gesture is aimed at the protrusion in Julien's trousers:

> Il m'a dit bonjour et m'a complimenté pour mon costume vert électrique tout en pointant son doigt vers mon sexe. Je me suis dit que ma braguette était ouverte. J'ai vite vérifié, ce n'était pas le cas. J'ai baissé le regard: la liasse d'argent que j'avais fourrée dans mon slip avait comme gonflé mes parties. Je l'ai remercié sans lever la tête. Je n'avais plus confiance en personne.[85]

After this encounter Julien is then mercilessly mocked by his roommates who burst out laughing at the sight of his green suit as soon as he opens the door to the apartment.[86]

Later in the narrative, Julien sets off in his green suit to travel through Paris on the metro. He experiences the effect of the Sape when his suit's bold hue attracts attention and his prominence paralyses other passengers. An awareness of the embarrassment he incites provokes in him a desire to laugh, implying a transitory sense of confidence that is abruptly ended by the condescending congratulations offered to him by an elderly passenger who expresses his admiration of the green suit and complains that his pale European skin inhibits him from wearing such bright colours in a comic about-turn that leaves Julien speechless: '"Vous savez, monsieur, moi j'aimerais vraiment porter une couleur pareille, mais à mon avis ça va mieux à des gens comme vous. . . Enfin, je veux dire, des gens qui viennent des pays du soleil."'[87] With Julien now the one who is feeling embarrassed, the elderly

85 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 34.
86 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 35.
87 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, p. 176.

gentleman congratulates him repeatedly, calling out '"Chapeau encore, monsieur! Chapeau vraiment!"' as he leaves the carriage.[88]

As Julien hastily leaves the train at the next stop he notices the sound of giggling and muffled laughter, which suggests that La Sape is the object of European mockery. Indeed, it is interesting to note how Mabanckou's depiction of the mockery of Julien's outfit recalls a scene from Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal. Poème* (1939), in which the latter describes the shame and embarrassment of witnessing two white women laughing at a black man in a streetcar in Paris:

> Un nègre comique et laid et des femmes derrière moi ricanaient en
> le regardant.
> Il était COMIQUE ET LAID
> COMIQUE ET LAID pour sûr[89]

Of course, the circumstances of Césaire's poem are markedly different in many respects to the scene that Mabanckou describes in *Tais-toi*. Nevertheless, in a sense, the 'comic and ugly' figure in Césaire's poem might be likened to Mbembe's postcolonial *homos ludens*, and perhaps also to the Harlequin figure of Julien, who is both openly mocked for his appearance by onlookers in the metro and subjected to their patronising congratulations.[90]

These interactions can be read as representations of the type of 'conviviality' that has been conceptualised by Mbembe for two reasons. Firstly, even if there is doubt regarding the impetus for European interest in African style, the reciprocal adoption and adaptation of the appearance of other cultures contribute towards a blurring of the boundary between dominator and dominated. Secondly, the complex competition between the

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88 Mabanckou, *Tais-toi et meurs*, pp. 176–177.
89 Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal. Poème* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956), pp. 40–41.
90 Lydie Moudileno alludes to this passage in Césaire's poem in her analysis of a scene that occurs in Daniel Biyaoula's *L'Impasse* (1996), in which the novel's Congolese protagonist scorns the appearance of African women on a bus. See *Parades Postcoloniales: la fabrication des identités dans le roman congolais* (Paris: Karthala, 2006), pp. 139–140.

diaspora and the extension of Sapeur style outside Congo unveils a hierarchical organisation that places the African Sapeur at its apex rather than the white European male. In this way, Mabanckou's depiction of La Sape teases out intricate layers of tension that suggest the 'hegemony/counter-hegemony' dichotomy that posits a consistent opposition between former coloniser and colonised is no longer applicable in the contemporary postcolonial environment.

In the end, Julien, Fessologue and Massala-Massala all turn away from La Sape. Julien finds it necessary to return to ordinary clothes in order to avoid detection by the police, Fessologue starts dating Sarah, a Belgian-French girl who convinces him to change his style and become what his friends at Jip's jokingly refer to as a 'hippie',[91] and Massala-Massala is repatriated to face the taunts of his countrymen who will mock him for being a '*Sapeur refoulé*'. Mabanckou's portrayal of La Sape through the lives of these characters highlights the complexity and entangled nature of this contemporary phenomenon which cannot be easily separated into camps of oppression and resistance along the lines of colonial history.

Since the publication of *Tais-toi*, Mabanckou has written two short pieces on La Sape, one fictional and the other non-fiction. The latter appears in a collection of vignettes entitled *Écrivain et oiseau migrateur* (2011), and the former appears as a short story entitled 'Confessions of a *sapeur*' in a volume of essays edited by Dominic Thomas and Nicki Hitchcott from 2014. Mabanckou's personal observations about La Sape in *Écrivain et oiseau* reveal a sense of frustration about the conviction – held by some Sapeurs, according to Mabanckou – that La Sape is a way of attacking colonial and postcolonial power.[92] He notes in scathingly sarcastic terms that:

91 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 243.
92 Alain Mabanckou, *Écrivain et oiseau migrateur* (Paris: André Versaille, 2011), p. 155.

> Certains observateurs diront de la SAPE qu'elle est une des conséquences de la colonisation – et beaucoup de Sapeurs, anticipant cette analyse, estiment que la SAPE aurait plutôt des origines précoloniales et remonterait à cette époque lointaine où nos ancêtres du royaume Kongo arboraient leurs tenues traditionnelles en raphia. Certes, mais pourquoi alors ne pas célébrer l'élégance traditionnelle? Mystère.[93]

Mabanckou also states, as if for the record, his view that 'La SAPE est, dans une certaine mesure, l'antithèse de la Beauté traditionnelle africaine, celle du tissu local, de l'élégance des ancêtres'.[94]

The author provides another example of his critical stance on Sapeur culture in the short story 'Confessions of a *sapeur*'. Over the course of a few pages, Mabanckou recounts the life of a young man from Nantes who moves to Paris and becomes involved in Sapeur culture. The narrator describes how the women he slept with usually laughed at his outfits before going to bed with him, and when he falls in love with his neighbour he finds out that she too is less than impressed by his Sapeur lifestyle. In the closing paragraphs of the story, we learn that she eventually leaves him for another man, and the narrator's final words of eternal allegiance to La Sape leave the reader with the tragi-comic image of a defiant, lonely Sapeur who pledges to be buried in his expensive clothes.

Mabanckou's most recent work on Sapeur culture suggests that the author has a somewhat jaded view of both the Congolese fashion movement and the ways in which it has been interpreted. In the novels that I have just examined, I argued that the author's jests can be seen to undermine the view of La Sape as a political statement and to expose its exploitative inner workings. Mabanckou's fiction also illustrates how some Sapeurs do not want to be Sapeurs at all. Moreover, his works point to the idea that many Sapeurs want to be involved in Sapeur culture for reasons that have nothing to do with colonial and postcolonial antagonism, and are more closely related to a pursuit of pleasure: they hope to seduce women, or to take part in social events, or to make money. It seems worth noting,

93 Mabanckou, *Écrivain et oiseau migrateur*, p. 155.
94 Mabanckou, *Écrivain et oiseau migrateur*, p. 154.

too, that the intentions of Sapeurs in the real world can't be pinned down through analysis of literary texts, and that, by the same token, socio-critical work on fashion movements like La Sape cannot account reliably for the motives of fictionalised Sapeurs, such as those found in Mabanckou's texts. It is this knotty relationship between texts and their contexts, or between the real world and the fictional world of a novel, that I will continue to explore in my next chapter through a focus on Mabanckou's intertextual in-jokes.

Chapter 2

Alain Mabanckou's Intertextual In-Jokes

même ivre, j'ai horreur des répétitions inutiles ou du remplissage comme certains écrivains connus pour être des bavards de première classe et qui vous vendent la même sauce dans chacun de leurs livres en faisant croire qu'ils créent un univers, mon œil[1]

Alain Mabanckou is a literary kleptomaniac. He collects parts of books and uses them in his own works, whether they are titles, characters, sentences, or themes. There are so many references to other novels in his prize-winning work *Verre cassé* (2005) that Tibor Fischer described it in the *Guardian* as a 'whistlestop tour of French literature and civilisation'. Fischer insists that, although there are enough cultural and intertextual musings in *Verre cassé* to fuel 'innumerable doctorates', the 'real meat of *Broken Glass* is its comic brio, and Mabanckou's jokes work the whole spectrum of humour'.[2] Picking up on Fischer's point about the important comic dimension to Mabanckou's intertextuality, this chapter examines three different types of fun that are generated through his interweaving of other texts into the narratives of *Verre cassé* and *Black Bazar*: games, nonsense and farce.

Since Julia Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in 1966, the idea of a piece of writing as a 'mosaic of quotations' has been continually updated and debated in academic

1 Alain Mabanckou, *Verre cassé* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), p. 92. Note that in the original text Mabanckou does not use full stops.
2 Tibor Fischer, 'Duck Soup: A Congolese comedy amuses Tibor Fischer', *Guardian* (London, 21 February 2009) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/feb/21/broken-glass-mabanckou-review> [accessed 30 October 2014].

criticism.[3] A fresh perspective on the topic is provided by Mary Orr, who in her reappraisal of the various theories of intertextuality asks within the first pages of her study whether intertextuality is not in fact 'like the story of "The emperor's new clothes", nonsense parading as grand theory?'.[4] Although it has had several different definitions and interpretations, I am using the term here to describe the recycling or 'borrowing' of texts in fiction.

As I have already mentioned in my introduction to this thesis, one of the ways that the technique of textual borrowing has routinely been understood in the field of postcolonial studies is as a manifestation of the theory of 'writing back'. A highly influential concept that 'set the critical agenda for the 1990s',[5] 'writing back' was founded in the late 1980s on the conviction that a postcolonial author's appropriation of the former coloniser's language and/or works of their literary canon functions as an effective form of postcolonial subversion. According to this theory, then, when postcolonial authors use intertextual devices to repeat established canonical stories whilst marking their difference from these texts and their grammatical structures, they undermine the authority of the former imperial 'centre'.

My aim here is certainly not to dismiss outright the importance of politically orientated parody in postcolonial writing. To do so would be to ignore persuasive interpretations of many postcolonial texts. Mabanckou's writing also has elements that could be convincingly seen as part of a 'writing back' agenda, such as the formal style in *Verre cassé* devoid of conventional punctuation. I would argue, though, that seeing *all* of Mabanckou's intertextuality in this way only achieves a revisionary understanding of his writing method, in the sense that his novels are used to support a certain pre-formed critical or political agenda. A good example of this appears in an article from 2010 by John Walsh, in which he advocates seeing *Verre cassé* as an 'answer' to a speech made by

3 Julia Kristeva, *Semeiotike. Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), pp. 82–112.
4 Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 2.
5 Liselotte Glage, 'Rewriting or Writing Back? Witi Ihimaera's *Dear Miss Mansfield*', in *Crabtracks: Progress and Process in Teaching the New Literatures in English*, ed. by Gordon Collier and Frank Schulze-Engler (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 321–330 (p. 321).

French president Nicholas Sarkozy in Dakar in July 2007 (bear in mind that the novel was published in 2005: Walsh acknowledges this fact, but does not let it deter him).[6] Insofar as Walsh envisages the novel as an attempt by the author to 'open up the French language to a plurality of sites and meanings', Walsh's analysis exemplifies the legacy of the 'writing back' model and highlights how it continues to shape arguments about intertextuality in a certain branch of postcolonial criticism.[7] What I would like to suggest, in moving beyond the framework of 'writing back', is that there is more to Mabanckou's use of other texts than political point-scoring. I want to argue that the critical focus on political subversion in postcolonial intertextual works has overshadowed the pleasurable, comic dimension of intertextuality; or, quite simply, that Mabanckou's humorous intertextuality requires us to think beyond the 'writing back' paradigm.

In the first part of this chapter, I aim to show how Mabanckou's textual games have an uplifting, playful quality that he creates through a kind of literary 'hide and seek' which teases and tests readers' recognition of various other texts. I argue that this generates a sense of fun and levity when reading Mabanckou's work, and I touch upon some examples of recent criticism that underscore the enjoyment that can be elicited from reading and recognising intertextuality. Next I consider how, even without this recognition, Mabanckou's intertextuality can still be comical due to the nonsense created by his crafting of passages almost entirely from other texts, which I argue can usefully be compared to a type of Deleuzian humour. Finally, by linking the author's intertextual technique to Fredric Jameson's concept of pastiche, I look at the farcical nature of Mabanckou's appropriations, which constitute some of the most comic episodes in the novel.

Games

6 John Walsh, 'Sarkozy, Mabanckou and Notes from the Bar: Alain Mabanckou's *Verre cassé*', *The French Review*, 84, 1 (2010), 127–139 (p. 127).
7 Walsh, p. 129.

Mabanckou's intertextuality often takes the form of textual games. In *Verre cassé,* these puzzles are what I am calling the 'Title Game' and the 'Name Game', and they play upon the reader's capacity to recognise other original works of literature and their authors. In order to get a general idea of the pervasiveness of Mabanckou's Title Game, it is only necessary to glance at random over two or three pages of *Verre cassé*: Mabanckou manages to pack a dizzying number of appropriations and allusions into every page. Titles of works by a range of African and Caribbean authors, for example, appear interwoven and camouflaged in the narrative of *Verre cassé* with only minimal changes, if any, to the original syntax: *Un été africain*, *Jazz et vin de palme*, *Le Songe d'une photo d'enfance, Les Arbres aussi versent des larmes, L'Aventure ambiguë*, *Pays sans chapeau, Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, *Le Fleuve détourné, Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, *Les Damnés de la terre*, *Lettre à la France nègre*, *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba*, *Le Cri des oiseaux fous, Trop de soleil tue l'amour*, *Les Arbres aussi versent des larmes, L'Enfant noir*, *Une si longue lettre, Le Feu des origines*, *Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille*, *La Grève des Bàttu*, *La Vie et demie, La plus haute des solitudes, Ville cruelle, Élégies majeures, Chants d'ombre, Le Dernier Survivant de la caravane*.[8]

Mabanckou also alludes to works by a diverse and international corpus of authors. For instance, he references titles such as *Vers le nord, Gora, Cent ans de solitude* (cited in French translation), *L'Amour au temps du choléra* (cited in French translation), *Une maison au bord des larmes*, *La Compassion des pierres*, *La Ville et les chiens* (cited in

8 Mohammed Dib, *Un été africain* (1959); Emmanuel Dongala, *Jazz et vin de palme* (1982); Louis-Philippe Dalembert, *Le Songe d'une photo d'enfance* (1993); Alain Mabanckou, *Les Arbres aussi versent des larmes* (1997); Cheikh Hamidou Kane, *L'Aventure ambiguë* (1961); Dany Laferrière, *Pays sans chapeau* (1996); Dany Laferrière, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985); Rachid Mimouni, *Le Fleuve détourné* (1982); Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939); Ousmane Sembène, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960); Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961); Yambo Ouologuem, *Lettre à la France nègre* (1969); Mongo Beti, *Le Pauvre Christ de Bomba* (1956); Dany Laferrière, *Le Cri des oiseaux fous* (2000); Mongo Beti, *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999); Camara Laye, *L'Enfant noir* (1953); Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* (1979); Emmanuel Dongala, *Le Feu des origines* (1987); Ferdinand Oyono, *Le Vieux Nègre et la medaille* (1956); Aminata Sow Fall, *La Grève des Battù* (1979); Sony Labou Tansi, *La Vie et demie* (1979); Tahar Ben Jelloun, *La plus haute des solitudes* (1977); Mongo Beti, *Ville cruelle* (1954); Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Élégies majeures* (1979); Léopold Sédar Senghor, *Chants d'ombre* (1945); Etienne Goyémidé, *Le Dernier Survivant de la caravane* (1985).

French translation), and *La Maison verte* (cited in French translation).[9] Addtionally, he includes references to works by European authors, such as *L'Homme approximatif*, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture, L'Homme au désir d'amour lointain, L'Afrique fantôme, Mort à crédit*, *Je voudrais que quelqu'un m'attende quelque part, La Vie devant soi*, *Le Sanglot de l'homme blanc: tiers monde, culpabilité, haine de soi*, *L'Étranger*.[10] Mabanckou also incorporates works of literature by American authors such as *L'Attrape-cœurs* (cited in French translation) and *Je sais pourquoi chante l'oiseau en cage* (cited in French translation) into Verre Cassé's monologues.[11] Mabanckou's textual trickery functions to foster a particularly playful relationship between author and reader, requiring the reader to identify his own words amongst the words from other authors' titles. The reader in this way takes an active role in the process of intertextuality as Mabanckou flirts with his or her awareness of international contemporary literature as well as works from the African and Western literary canons.

As we have seen, then, the Title Game intermingles different categories of fictional work in such a way that the author's aims cannot convincingly be explained from a 'writing back' perspective. For instance, at first glance, Mabanckou's incorporation of references to certain Western works of literature might be seen as an example of the author 'writing back': On closer examination, Mabanckou's use of titles from the Western canon, such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, can only be interpreted plausibly as anti-colonial to quite a limited degree. The example of Conrad's title appears in the first pages of *Verre cassé* in a scene in which the narrator evokes the controversy that was elicited by

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9 Stefan Psenak, *Vers le nord* (1996); Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora* (1910); Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Cent ans de solitude* (1967); Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *L'Amour au temps du choléra* (1985); Vénus Khoury-Ghata, *Une maison au bord des larmes* (1998); Vénus Khoury-Ghata, *Compassion des pierres* (2001); Mario Vargas Llosa, *La Ville et les chiens* (1962); Mario Vargas Llosa, *La Maison Verte* (1965).

10 Tristan Tzara, *L'Homme approximatif* (1931); Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (1953); François-Régis Bastide, *L'Homme au désir d'amour lointain* (1996); Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934); Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Mort à crédit* (1936); Anna Gavalda, *Je voudrais que quelqu'un m'attende quelque part* (1999); Émile Ajar (aka. Romain Gary), *La Vie devant soi* (1975); Pascal Bruckner, *Le Sanglot de l'homme blanc : tiers monde, culpabilité, haine de soi* (1983); Albert Camus, *L'Étranger* (1942).

11 J. D. Salinger, *L'Attrape-cœurs* (1951); Maya Angalou, *Je sais pourquoi chante l'oiseau en cage* (1969).

the opening of his favourite bar 'Le Crédit a voyagé'. Verre Cassé describes the turn of events after opposition to the bar by religious zealots, an association of recovering alcoholics, and hired hooligans is publicised by the press. His description includes citations of works by African authors Guy Menga, Ferdinand Oyono and Olympe Bhêly-Quénum, as well as Joseph Conrad:

> une action directe des groupes de casseurs payés par quelques vieux cons du quartier qui regrettaient la Case de Gaulle, la joie de mener une vie de boy, une vie de vieux Nègre et la médaille, une vie de l'époque de l'exposition coloniale et des bals nègres de Joséphine Baker gesticulant avec des bananes autour de la taille, et alors ces gens de bonne réputation ont tendu un piège sans fin au patron avec leurs casseurs cagoulés qui sont venus au milieu de la nuit, au cœur des ténèbres[12]

Kathryn Batchelor, who published an article in 2013 on the challenges involved in translating the intense intertextuality of *Verre cassé*, suggests that in the above quotation the appropriation of Conrad's title alongside the titles of texts by African authors could potentially be read as 'an effort by Mabanckou to raise the profile of the African authors and perhaps suggest that African authors more generally should not be overlooked in a canon of great literature'.[13] Nevertheless, as Batchelor goes on to explain, this hypothesis can only be taken so far, due to the fact that these borrowings form part of a wider network of intertextuality comprised of a diverse range of books, meaning that this reference cannot be convincingly interpreted as an attack on the authority of the European canon.

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12 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 15. In order of appearance, the references are as follows: Guy Menga, *Case de Gaulle* (1984); Ferdinand Oyono, *Une vie de boy* (1956); Ferdinand Oyono, *Le Vieux Nègre et la médaille* (1956); Olympe Bhêly-Quénum, *Un piège sans fin* (1960); Joseph Conrad, *Au Cœur des ténèbres* [*Heart of Darkness*] (1899).

13 Kathryn Batchelor, 'Postcolonial Intertextuality and Translation Explored through the Work of Alain Mabanckou', in *Intimate Enemies: Translation in Francophone Contexts*, ed. by Kathryn Batchelor and Claire Bisdorff (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 196–215 (p. 201).

Batchelor uses two separate models to envisage Mabanckou's intertextual practice, one of which is 'parodic revision'.[14] As part of her analysis, she maintains that the parodic revision model that sees intertextuality aimed solely at the former colonial centre cannot withstand the complexity of Mabanckou's intertextuality. If she hints that the placement of African authors alongside canonical European writers in *Verre cassé* may be read as an attempt to raise the profile of African authors, Batchelor also qualifies this statement with two important points. First, she notes that parodic revision, like 'writing back', tends towards universalising interpretations of texts rooted in a specific time and place.[15] Secondly, she argues that such an interpretation would ignore the plethora of non-African references in the novel, insisting that 'Any theory that seeks to outline the significance of the hidden titles in *Verre cassé* must take into account the eclecticism that characterizes Mabanckou's use of intertextuality as a literary device'.[16]

So, rather than use specific instances of the parodic repetition of canonical works in order to bolster a preconceived notion of postcolonial writing's subversiveness, Batchelor's analysis underscores the important variety of other titles that make up the rest of the passage, providing a nuanced analysis of the playfulness of Mabanckou's intertextuality. Batchelor's second model is Glissant's notion of 'Tout-Monde', which she uses as a framework of interpretation that is not limited to a national context and points to the fact that Mabanckou has himself invoked the 'Tout-Monde' in interviews when discussing the style of his blog.[17] Underscoring the idea that Mabanckou's works produce a sense of pleasure for the reader of his intertextual prose, Batchelor asserts that:

> In today's Google-happy era, the discovery of further intertexts – and thus the encounter with hitherto unknown literature from cultures beyond the reader's usual repertoire – can be achieved in seconds. In this way, the reader may achieve that 'delight of recognition, or

14 Batchelor, pp. 200–201.
15 Batchelor, pp. 201–202.
16 Batchelor, p. 202.
17 See Dominic Thomas, 'New Technologies and the Popular: Alain Mabanckou's Blog', *Research in African Literatures*, 39, 4 (2008), 58–71.

> the victory of successful negotiation of a textual maze' (Orr, 2003: 37) that is associated with Michael Riffaterre's development of the intertextuality concept, without – thanks to the internet – having to be 'widely-read', 'well-educated' or 'erudite' (Orr, 2003: 39), to use some of the terms that Mary Orr employs to problematize the supposed universality of Riffaterre's reader.[18]

Vivan Steemers suggests that, for readers who are aware of the game and who participate in the guesswork involved with reading Mabanckou's writing, there is also a reward for playing that is synonymous with delight. In an article published in 2014 on the difficulties that *Verre cassé*'s intertextuality presents for a translator, Steemers focuses on the problems that the novel creates in translation given its dependence on collective memory. As part of her discussion of the three hundred references she identifies in *Verre cassé* (two hundred and sixty of which she estimates are lost in the English translation), Steemers argues that *Verre cassé* can be read in two different 'degrees'.[19] Essentially, reading the text in the first degree means reading without recognition of the intertextuality, and reading it in the second degree means taking into account the author's literary references. Steemers likens these two different approaches to the text to Barthes's two 'régimes' of reading described in *Le Plaisir du texte,* in which Barthes distinguishes between 'le plaisir' and 'jouissance':

> 'Jouissance' is inspired by the second type of reading, the focus on 'uttering' as opposed to the 'sequence of utterances,' the recognition of the references, the playing of the intellectual puzzle, the author's game of unraveling his clues, his 'clins d'œil' 'veiled allusions,' his borrowings and citations, all types of intertextuality.[20]

Drawing upon work by Ermine Kotin Mortimer, Steemers then goes on to emphasise the

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18 Batchelor, p. 204.
19 Vivan Steemers, 'Broken Glass or Broken Text? The Translatability of Alain Mabanckou's *Verre cassé* (2005) into English', *Research in African Literatures*, 45, 1 (2014), 107–124 (p. 115).
20 Steemers, p. 115.

specific enjoyment in the sense of 'jouissance' that accompanies recognition of intertextuality.[21] She envisages Mabanckou's motivation for the novel's celebration of 'bookish inebriation'[22] as the search for the collective memory that makes 'jouissance' possible and, ultimately, regrets the loss of this effect that inevitably results for the reader of the English translation.

Steemers's underscoring of the joyfulness or bliss of recognition that is part of the experience of reading Mabanckou's novel supports my argument that there is an important sense of levity to his textual borrowings. In contrast to Steemers, who suggests that the author's use of intertexts amplifies his reader's ability to understand the nuances of his social critique and closely links the moments of 'jouissance' to the 'magnification of the ideological message',[23] I think his use of titles has a value that is quite separate from any putative political aims.[24] Accordingly, I would argue that the idea of intertextuality's 'jouissance' does not need to be hitched to a political motivation in order for it to merit critical consideration. As even Steemers points out, some critics have exaggerated the function of Mabanckou's intertexts and in an attempt to valorise them have overstated their political impact, such as when Marie-Claire Guiziou argues that the 'charge critique est essentiellement continue dans ces apports allogènes que le narrateur dépouille et travestit avant de les diluer dans son propre discours'.[25]

If Mabanckou's Title Game generates an enjoyable experience for the reader who familiarises him- or herself with each separate title, then it is worth noting this delight is not guaranteed for all readers. As part of the game, the textual borrowings are deliberately disguised and consequently many of the references are likely to be read as part of the original narrative. Mabanckou almost mockingly suggests the existence of an imaginary potential reader who could identify the plethora of African, European, and American texts

21 Steemers, p. 115.
22 Steemers, p. 116.
23 Steemers, p. 119.
24 Steemers, p. 117.
25 Marie-Claire Durand Guiziou, 'L'effet palimpseste dans *Verre cassé* d'Alain Mabanckou', *Écrire au-delà des limites*, 2 (2006), 31–48 (p. 36).

hidden in his work. Thus, insofar as the Title Game involves a playful incorporation of other titles in sequences that veil their status as citations, the act of reading the narrative takes on the character of a game of recognition with the author that is not unlike the reader's interaction with the text when reading a work composed using Oulipian constraints. In a sense, then, Mabanckou's Title Game is similar to the type of word play found in the writings of George Perec, whose fictional works such as *La Disparition* (1969) and his collections of poetry like *Alphabets* (1976) are particularly good examples of ludic literature. David Bellos has written of Perec's long-standing love of recognised games such as crossword puzzles, Go, and chess.[26] David Gascoigne has also noted Perec's interest in private games, suggesting that 'recognized games, whether adversarial or solitary, are normally marked by a clear outcome or endpoint – checkmate or completed crossword. Perec's solitary and private games could, however, be divergent in their outcomes or solutions, with no single solution identified, and no fixed criterion of success or failure'.[27] Even if Mabanckou's work is far less explicit than Perec's with regard to the rules or system he uses as part of his creative process (there are no grids, bi-squares, lipograms or palindromes in Mabanckou's texts), his writing is at times so densely packed with borrowed titles that it becomes almost like a wordsearch rather than a piece of fiction.

There is another way that Mabanckou injects a game-like quality into his work by playing with intertextuality. The Name Game, for instance, is an example of textual tactics that target the limits of his reader's literary horizons rather than political aims. The Name Game is created when Mabanckou's characters allude to, but then forget the names of various famous authors. The reader is alerted to the author's historical importance but may be compelled to guess or deduce (or perhaps even research!) his or her name and background. Aside from giving his reader an insight into his own literary inspirations, the Name Game is central to Mabanckou's sense of fun, constituting a playful encouragement

26 David Bellos, *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (London: Harper Collins, 2010), p. 576.
27 David Gascoigne, *The Games of Fiction: Georges Perec and Modern French Ludic Narrative* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 30.

to his reader that he or she should seek out the 'owner' of the original texts he is citing.

In the Name Game, Aimé Césaire is the author most frequently described rather than cited according to standard conventions. Césaire is alluded to as 'un type en colère, un poète noir qui disait des paroles courageuses' before further hints of his identity are produced through references to the title of his most celebrated work, interspersed amongst Fessologue's paraphrasing of the poem.[28] Césaire is sketched out as a dangerous man who, Fessologue warns his readers, must be taken seriously, because 'il avait aussi écrit noir sur blanc: *Parce que nous vous haïssons, vous et votre raison, nous nous réclamons de la démence précoce, de la folie flambante, du cannibalisme tenace . . .*'.[29] The citation in this case is a rare example of the narrative adhering (at least typographically) to European standard grammar and marking the intertext's presence in the narrative through the use of italics. The reference is significant too for the way that Fessologue's preceding 'warning' to the reader about how to read Césaire's remarks as 'serious' plays upon Césaire's own irony. Mabanckou creates a *mise-en-abyme* of irony that highlights the ambiguities involved in interpreting parodic texts. In other instances where Césaire's identity remains unknown but his status as an author is still alluded to, Mabanckou makes no distinction between Césaire's text and Fessologue's narrative voice. This happens for example when the shopkeeper known as 'Arabe du coin' begins every one of his conversations with customers who enter his store with Césaire's words 'L'Occident nous a trop longtemps gavés de mensonges et gonflés de pestilences, mon frère africain!', before asking, 'Tu sais quel poète noir a dit ces paroles courageuses, hein?'.[30] Despite the many times that this rhetorical sequence occurs in the text, the author's name is never revealed.

The Anglophone postcolonial writer Wole Soyinka is treated in the Name Game as an author whom the narrator only partially cites. Soyinka is alluded to during a rant in which Fessologue is sermonising against one of his roommates who has irritated him by constantly boasting about his sexual prowess. Soyinka's famous challenge to the values of

28 Alain Mabanckou, *Black Bazar* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), p. 56.
29 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, pp. 56–57.
30 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 112.

the Negritude movement becomes comical in Mabanckou's humorous appropriation of it, as every time his friend 'en rajoutait sur ses performances et la longueur exceptionnelle de sa chose-là, je me souvenais alors de cet homme intelligent qui a dit que le tigre ne se pavane pas en criant sa tigritude, il bondit sur sa proie et la dévore'.[31] The citation is striking in its irreverence toward the original context and political import of Soyinka's remark. To claim that this parodic appropriation is a type of 'writing back' would be obtuse, an appraisal that would deny the sense of comic self-reflection that Mabanckou's work excels in and a critical move that would overlook the specifically Anglophone and postcolonial origins of the original text.

The irreverence with which Fessologue alludes to Soyinka reappears in his reference to the Senegalese author Cheikh Anta Diop. Here the aforementioned 'Arabe du coin' forgets the author's name after having used Diop's work to support his theories on black supremacy. He asks Fessologue if he can remember the name of the 'grand historien, un grand érudit' and then shrugs off his *trou de mémoire* by glibly commenting that 'ça me reviendra, et de toute façon les Sénégalais, c'est simple, faut pas chercher midi à quatorze heures, ils s'appellent tous Diop, l'essentiel est de trouver leur prénom'.[32] The remarks seem to suggest a condescending and demeaning attitude to authors from outside of Europe. Nevertheless, this attitude comes in this case not from Europeans but from an African man – the 'Arabe du coin' – who represents a more complicated identification with the 'centre' than the binaries integral to 'writing back' allow.

The only author exempted from the rules of Mabanckou's Name Game is Yambo Ouologuem, whose name *is* remembered, this time by Fessologue's xenophobic neighbour Monsieur Hippocrate. Although Ouologuem is first referenced anonymously via his controversial work *Le Devoir de violence* and then seemingly forgotten, Fessologue leaves with his name ringing in his ears as Hippocrate shouts out to him:

31 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 90.
32 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, pp. 112–113.

> – Je me souviens maintenant: le nom de l'Africain qui a écrit *Le Devoir de violence*, c'est Yambo Ouologuem. Il faut le lire, lui au moins c'est un vrai monsieur. C'est pour ça que tout le monde s'est ligué contre lui . . .[33]

It's no coincidence that Ouologuem is an author who was publicly condemned as a plagiarist and who had his writing career ruined by outraged French critics who denounced his work. It is ironic, in other words, that of all of the authors in the Name Game, Ouologuem's name is the one that is recalled and his status as author and owner of the outlawed text is not 'forgotten', since Ouologuem's legitimacy as a writer was famously called into question.

In *Verre cassé*, too, Mabanckou's intertextuality plays upon authors' names. In a slightly different way to the Name Game of *Black Bazar*, in *Verre cassé* the names of authors are recycled for Mabanckou's own characters and places, often in comic fashion. For instance, Mabanckou elides the names of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's texts *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Mort à Crédit* to create the name of the bar 'Le Crédit a voyagé'. These works by Céline also clearly provide a template for Mabanckou's novel in their laconic style and caustic descriptions of misery. This influence is most evident from the fact that one of the characters, who goes by the sobriquet L'Imprimeur, provides another oblique reference to a major theme in Céline's novels when he describes how his wife, called Céline, is 'secrétaire de direction dans un laboratoire pharmaceutique à Colombes'.[34] The completion of this allusion is accomplished later in the narrative when L'Imprimeur mentions how his son had warned him repeatedly that Céline was having an affair with a man called Ferdinand, only to return home one day to find his wife in bed with his son. He describes to Verre Cassé how when he caught them they were 'enlacés dans la position du pauvre Christ de Bomba', and that he reacted to this disturbing sight

33 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 232.
34 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 68.

by crying out 'le cri des oiseaux fous'.[35] The inclusion of references to novels by Mongo Beti and Dany Laferrière in this tale of woe provides another illustration of the constant Game of Titles in Mabanckou's narrative, and brings me on to my next point: the way that the rules of Mabanckou's games give the text itself a strange, nonsensical effect.

Nonsense

Mabanckou's literary 'hide and seek' is comparable to what Gilles Deleuze described as the 'ideal game'. In his examination of Lewis Carroll's invention of games in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Deleuze pinpoints a type of imaginary, ideal play. These games are without winner or loser and are lacking in sense or function, such as 'la partie de croquet, où les boules sont des hérissons, les maillets des flamants roses, les arceaux des soldats qui ne cessent de se déplacer d'un bout à l'autre de la partie'.[36] Deleuze states that this type of ideal game 'ne peut pas être réalisé par un homme ou par un dieu. Il ne peut être que pensé, et encore pensé comme non-sens'.[37]

If the Title and the Name games are recognised by the reader, then this should signal to them that the text is not a realistic representation of life in Congo. If these games go undetected, Mabanckou's textual jests result in a type of nonsensical comedy narrated by a hopelessly babbling drunk whose stories lurch from one strange description to the next. This interpretation of Mabanckou's intertextuality is based on the idea that even without recognition of authors and texts interwoven into his original work, the reader still enjoys a kind of pleasurable puzzlement at what can be compared to the type of humour described by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

Deleuze's conception of humour is elucidated in three of his works: *La Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: le froid et le cruel* (1967), *Différence et Répétition* (1968), and *Logique du sens* (1969). Deleuze first introduces his theory of humour in his

35 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 84.
36 Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969), p. 74.
37 Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 76.

analysis of the work of novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. As part of his analysis of the Austro-Hungarian's novel *Venus in Furs* (1870), he describes humour as a masochistic subversion of authority that overturns 'The Law' through an excess of zeal.[38] Deleuze then associates humour with the undermining of authority in a way that finds a more detailed articulation in *Répétition et Différence*. In a passage in the latter volume, Deleuze asserts that in modern thought there are two ways of overturning moral law: the first being irony and the second humour. Irony in Deleuze's thinking is akin to 'la remontée vers les principes, et du renversement des principes' whilst humour is when 'on descend vers les conséquences, qu'on s'y soumet avec une minutie trop parfaite'.[39] Deleuze goes on to clarify his definition of irony as 'un art des principes' in opposition to humour, which is 'un art des conséquences et des descentes, des suspens et des chutes'.[40] It is this definition that will be the basis of what appears to be the first part of the Deleuzian critical approach to humour.

The second part of his conception of humour appears in *Logique du sens*, when it is described as 'l'art des surfaces et des doublures'.[41] *Logique du sens* is composed of thirty-four interrelated 'series' that can be linked together with different themes, as Sean Bowden has demonstrated.[42] One such theme is nonsense, which not only has a series of its own (the 11th), but can also be traced through series 10 and 19 on the ideal game and humour, respectively. Deleuze champions humour as one possible way to challenge Modernist ironic perspectives of language that get caught up in 'the inevitable irony of irony'.[43] Claire Colebrook provides a helpful explanation of this idea in her work on irony from 2004 in which she poses a series of questions in order to demonstrate how the ironist's position is inevitably trapped within its own system of discourse. She asks:

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38 Gilles Deleuze, *La Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: le froid et le cruel* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967), p. 71.
39 Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), p. 12.
40 Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*, p. 12.
41 Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 166.
42 Sean Bowden, *The Priority of Events: Deleuze's* Logic of Sense (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 3.
43 Candace Lang, *Irony/Humor: Critical Paradigms* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 59.

> How can one offer a critique of judging reason without adopting a tone of judgment? How can one present the cruelties of morality without moralising? How can one criticise the rational point of view that detaches itself from all contexts, without such a criticism creating its own elevated context? [...] One cannot avoid the *predicament* of irony. The attempt to think a context *itself* can only take place if one has a *sense*, definition or position in relation to that context.[44]

In order to escape the ironic viewpoint, Deleuzian humour 'descends to the depths of life, disclosing forces or powers that can never be exhausted by representation'.[45] Deleuze contemplates where this 'downward' motion of humour might lead, asking 'où nous précipite une pareille descente?'.[46] His answer links humour explicitly to the idea of nonsense, and, furthermore, links nonsense to the concept of surface:

> Il faut que, du même mouvement par lequel le langage tombe de haut, puis s'enfonce, nous soyons ramenés à la surface, là où il n'y a plus rien à désigner ni même à signifier, mais où le sens pur est produit: produit dans son rapport essentiel avec un troisième élément, cette fois le non-sens de surface.[47]

In order to dodge irony's pitfall, then, Deleuze argues for the advantages of the 'downward' motion of humour that moves from the authority of the moral law to focus on its consequences, rather than the supposedly upward movement of irony towards a higher principle. But there is a notable contradiction in Deleuze's terms for humour. Whilst Deleuze denies humour's operation along a 'vertical' axis and therefore refutes its participation in the depth/surface system of meaning, his emphasis on the downward movement of humour seems still to be caught within this layered view of language and

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44 Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), pp. 120–121.
45 Colebrook, pp. 120–121.
46 Deleuze, *Logique du sens,* p. 160.
47 Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, pp. 160–161.

meaning. This paradox is perhaps best expressed by Deleuze's statement that 'Ce qui est plus profond que tout fond, c'est la surface, la peau'.[48] In Deleuze's terms, then, humour is an '"art de la surface" the [study of] the play of meaning across textual surfaces'.[49] Still, the question of how effectively Deleuze has been able to dismiss the dominance of depth-orientated criticism remains unresolved.

A striking example of Deleuzian humour as 'a play of meaning across textual surfaces' is discernible in the excerpt below – another example of the Title Game – but one in which this time the reader can simply revel in the aesthetic pleasure of reading sentences produced almost entirely using literary allusions. Even without being aware that the text is a composite of other textual excerpts the Title Game can produce pleasure for the reader as an 'art of surfaces' crafted out of the recycled titles that Mabanckou incorporates into his own narrative:

> je me souviendrai toujours de ma première traversée d'un pays d'Afrique, c'était la Guinée, j'étais l'enfant noir, j'étais fasciné par le labeur des forgerons, j'étais intrigué par la reptation d'un serpent mystique qui avalait un roseau que je croyais tenir réellement entre les mains, et très vite je retournais au pays natal, je goûtais aux fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain, j'habitais dans une chambre de l'hôtel *La Vie et demie* qui n'existe plus de nos jours et où, chaque soir, entre jazz et vin de palme, mon père aurait exulté de joie, et je me réchauffais au feu des origines, pourtant il fallait aussitôt repartir, ne pas s'enfermer dans la chaleur de la terre natale, sillonner le reste du continent pour écouter les élégies majeures, les chants d'ombres, il fallait traverser des villes cruelles dans l'espoir de rencontrer un dernier survivant de la caravane, il fallait vraiment partir, remonter vers le nord du continent, vivre la plus haute des solitudes, voir le fleuve détourné, résider dans la grande maison illuminée par un été africain[50]

48 Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, p. 166.
49 Candace Lang, 'Irony/Humor: Assessing French and American Critical Trends', *boundary 2*, 10, 3 (1982), 271–302 (p. 272).
50 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, pp. 210–212.

In the example above, the narrator's desire to warm himself around the 'fire of origins' and 'live the highest of solitudes' are references to novels by Emmanuel Dongala and Tahar Ben Jelloun, respectively, but their displacement into Mabanckou's work has not been done in order to use the contexts of these novels as part of political commentary. There is, on the contrary, a humorous use of these titles as 'surfaces' in this passage that gives the overall narrative an odd, nonsensical dimension.

Another instance of humorous play in *Verre cassé* occurs when the author introduces fictional characters from other novels into his narrative. One day, for example, young Holden Caulfield wanders into the world of 'Le Crédit a voyagé' straight out of J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. Verre Cassé outlines Holden's life in detail but without crediting his creation to Salinger, and therefore not making it explicit that Holden is in fact fictional. A reader without prior knowledge of Salinger's story is therefore confronted with the bizarre cameo appearance of a young American who is mercilessly mocked by the drunk Congolese writer. And even for those readers who are aware of Holden's past life in Salinger's text, the conversation between the young American and Verre Cassé is still fairly nonsensical until the latter, impatient with the young man's endless questions about birds in the winter and his hyperbolic melancholia, makes to leave. Holden actually executes a pivotal role in the novel, as in his final act Verre Cassé gives him his diary to return to the owner of the bar 'Escargot entêté' before putting an end to his days in the local river.[51]

Fictional worlds collide again when Santiago from Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea* introduces himself to Verre Cassé. The pair chat in a way that reveals the story from which Santiago has originated, but, true to form, without any explicit citation of the author or the title of the novel. The two fictional characters have a strange one-sided conversation in which Santiago introduces himself to Verre Cassé by saying '« jeune homme, je me présente, je m'appelle Santiago, je suis un pêcheur, ma barque est toujours

51 The name of the owner of the bar is another intertextual reference, this time to Rachid Boudjedra's novel *L'Escargot entêté* (1977).

vide, mais j'aime la pêche »', to which Verre Cassé responds by silently admiring the old man's stamina.[52] The contexts of the original texts by Salinger and Hemingway are not juxtaposed with Verre Cassé's life and surroundings as part of a subversive assault against the authority of American/Western literature. Rather, there is a convivial conflation of each character's fictional world as their stories are interwoven. The point of these walk-on parts for characters from other books is not that the contexts from which they originate lend weight to Mabanckou's overarching political aims. It is instead an underscoring of the text's flexibility as fiction, its place within a world of fiction, fantasy and invention, and the author's exercising of creative freedom.

Mabanckou's foregrounding of his own text's 'fictionality' through the inclusion of other fictional characters into his text calls to mind E. L. Doctorow's similar treatment of fictional characters in the postmodern work *Ragtime* (1975). In *Ragtime*, historical figures such as Harry Houdini and J. P. Morgan make slickly combined cameo appearances alongside the fictional protagonist Tateh, his daughter 'Little Girl', and the ragtime piano player Coalhouse Walker. Linda Hutcheon has argued that this text has three parallel families that are woven together to create an extended political commentary on American democratic ideals.[53] Despite her convincing analysis, which, even Jameson concedes, is 'expertly articulated', his counter argument is that these borrowed characters are 'incomparable substances, like oil and water – Houdini being a *historical* figure, Tateh a *fictional* one, and Coalhouse an *intertextual* one' which in his eyes makes it difficult to endorse Hutcheon's interpretation.[54] Jameson goes on to argue that Doctorow's different categories of characters work to produce a sense of *déjà vu* when reading the text due to the way the author forces the reader to rely upon their prior knowledge:

52 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, pp. 212–213.
53 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 61–62.
54 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 22–23.

> I would argue that the designation of both types of characters – historical names and capitalized family roles – operates powerfully and systematically to reify all these characters and to make it impossible for us to receive their representation without the prior interception of already acquired knowledge or doxa – something which lends the text an extraordinary sense of déjà vu and a peculiar familiarity one is tempted to associated with Freud's 'return of the repressed' in 'The Uncanny' rather than with any solid historiographic formation on the reader's part.[55]

In some ways, Jameson's analysis of Doctorow's work highlights the paradox of Deleuzian humour; as I already noted, it still requires a type of depth even if it is a play of surfaces. Although Doctorow's work differs from Mabanckou's in the sense that his intertextuality blurs the boundaries between fiction and history, whereas Mabanckou's remains for the most part within the domain of the literary, the style of the narratives has clear parallels. The link between Mabanckou's writing technique and postmodern precedents requires us to reconsider the motives behind such playful insertions of 'people' from contrasting contexts – real or fictional – into his literary texts.

Mabanckou mines a variety of sources to compile his intertextual collage. In *Verre cassé*, for instance, he contrasts French canonical literary references with contemporary postcolonial authors, alluding to and borrowing from established high cultural texts such as Corneille's *Le Cid,* Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel,* Hugo's *Napoléon le Petit,* Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and Sartre's *Huis-clos*. In *Black Bazar* there is a much wider range of references incorporated into the text and this results in a lively jumble of cultural output. These include classical and Biblical texts (Scylla and Charybdis, Jean de La Fontaine, Old Testament), cartoons (Lucky Luke, Asterix, Tintin), music (Koffi Olomidé, Papa Wemba, Phil Collins, Francis Bebey), Hollywood films (*Saving Private Ryan*, *The Longest Day*, *Jaws*, *Scarface*, *Night of the Living Dead*) and famous actors (Catherine Deneuve, Juliette Binoche, Vanessa Paradis), artworks

55 Jameson, p. 24.

(Ousmane Sow's Parisian exhibit on the Pont des Arts, Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*), works of philosophy (Kant) and footballers (Pélé). The fact that some of these references are part of popular culture draws attention to the author's deliberately broad base of contemporary source texts, underscoring the diversity of the globalised environment about which he is writing. The sheer range of his intertextuality marks his liberation from the confines of a limited postcolonial spectrum of influence that is implicit in the theory of 'writing back'. Mabanckou's interweaving of different texts, coupled with his constant flux between high and low cultural citations, also works to extend an invitation to the many readers who may more easily recognise the works of Steven Spielberg than those of Jean-Paul Sartre.

The mixture of materials from which Mabanckou derives his references is also illustrated in a more specifically literary way during an episode in which Verre Cassé is lamenting his role as the scribe of 'Le Crédit a voyagé'. In the excerpt below, the inclusion of the Peruvian author Mario Vargas Llosa's work *La Casa Verde* (*Une maison verte*) from 1966 and Franco-Lebanese author Vénus Khoury-Ghata's 2005 novel *Une maison au bord des larmes* as well as the French authors Pascal Bruckner's *Le Sanglot de l'homme blanc: tiers monde, culpabilité, haine de soi* (1983) and Michel Leiris's 1934 study *L'Afrique fantôme* alongside appropriations from Mongo Beti and Camara Laye complicate any supposed 'centrality' of anti-colonial intention behind Mabanckou's intertextuality. Here, then, is another example of how Mabanckou's compilation of intertextual excerpts creates an end product that can be read, on the surface, as a type of humoristic nonsense:

> je lui ai dit que je laissais l'écriture à ceux qui rappellent que trop de soleil tue l'amour, à ceux qui prophétisent le sanglot de l'homme blanc, l'Afrique fantôme, l'innocence de l'enfant noir, je lui ai dit que je laissais l'écriture à ceux qui peuvent bâtir une ville avec

> des chiens, à ceux qui édifient une maison verte comme celle de L'Imprimeur ou une maison au bord des larmes pour y héberger des personnages humbles[56]

To conclude from the above passage that Mabanckou deploys textual excerpts to target or recuperate European authority seems somewhat contrived. In no sense are these appropriations orientated critically against European colonial authority and in no sense is the parodic adaption being used to make a statement on the original texts' context or content. The ambiguity of his textual borrowing – in the sense that the author's attitude and intentions with regards to the actual source texts he borrows from are open to interpretation – is an underlying issue when it comes to reaching a definitive verdict about his intertextuality. Fully aware of the pitfalls of appropriation as a literary technique, Mabanckou at times turns the notion of politically orientated parody itself into a farce.

Farce

If Mabanckou's intertextuality has a comic element to it both when it is recognised and when it is not, it can also be seen to mock the very notion of recognition, making the idea of appropriation as a political act appear farcical. The examples that I will examine in this section of the chapter have a notable critical edge to them, but their antagonism does not undermine a European 'centre'. Instead, it mocks the assumption of reader recognition implicit in theories like 'writing back' which seem to take for granted the idea that textual reappropriation in postcolonial writing should be understood as a form of political resistance. The following two examples are episodes that, through the use of repetition, display some of the principal characteristics of pastiche as it is articulated by Jameson in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

According to Jameson, pastiche is similar to parody in its imitation of a style or particular technique. However, pastiche is 'a neutral practice of such mimicry, without

56 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, pp. 199–200.

any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists'.[57] Pastiche as Jameson describes it, then, entails a doing away with the depth/surface hermeneutic from which conventional parody proceeds. The emphasis on surface in Jameson's work evolves into a more general discussion of the four principal 'depth models' that he argues have been repudiated by contemporary theory. Briefly, they are: i) dialectical, of essence and appearance; ii) Freudian, of latent and manifest; iii) existential, of authenticity and inauthenticity; and iv) semiotic, of signifier and signified. Jameson concludes that a focus on practices, discourses, and textual play has replaced these various models, stipulating that 'here too depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces (what is often called intertextuality is in that sense no longer a matter of depth)'.[58] This illuminating view on a depthless intertextuality, or what he terms pastiche, opens up the notion of appropriation to encompass a style of textual borrowing that acts as a parody of parody itself, or a farce of parody; in other words, pastiche.

The most prominent example of this flattened farce of parodic borrowing, or pastiche, in Mabanckou's works is the 'J'accuse' charade. It occurs in *Verre cassé* at a point in the novel when Le Crédit a voyagé's surroundings have inadvertently attracted even more attention than the bar itself. Public resentment towards the bar persists and its continued existence is eventually debated at the governmental level. This results in a stalemate between ministers who want to close down the bar and those who argue for it to remain operational, dividing the country in two. At this point in the narrative the reader is introduced to the Minister of Agriculture, Trade and Small and Medium-sized Businesses, Albert Zou Loukia, who intervenes to defend the bar's longevity. Loukia's skills as an orator are coveted by the President, who apparently lacks the former's ability to 'sédui[re]

57 Jameson, p. 17.
58 Jameson, p. 12.

son auditoire par son érudition', which in fact more accurately describes his ability to memorise and recite entire pages of books by 'grands auteurs'.[59]

Loukia gains notoriety as a celebrated politician in favour of the bar after he gives a speech in which he repeats the first person conjugation of the verb '*accuser*' made famous in January of 1898 by Émile Zola. Whereas Zola inveighed against 'la chasse aux "sales juifs"', Loukia condemns the 'chasse à l'homme' that has targeted 'Escargot entêté'.[60] Verre Cassé describes how the President is reduced to a childish possessiveness and jealousy of the 'J'accuse' slogan that Loukia purloins for his own speech as 'le président-général des armées aurait voulu que cette formule populaire sort de sa bouche à lui'.[61] Apparently ignorant of the French political history epitomised by the Dreyfus Affair and Zola's literary tract, President Mingi rages against Loukia, who he seems to think thought up the 'J'accuse' formula in order to undermine his Presidential power.

In a desperate bid to surpass the success of his political rival, President Mingi locks his advisors into an office and commands them to spend all night creating a superior turn of phrase to the much lauded 'J'accuse' formula. In the midnight hours they collaboratively decide to place a call to 'une personnalité influente de l'Académie française qui était paraît-il le seul Noir dans l'histoire de cette auguste assemblée'.[62] This anonymously referenced figure of letters is of course Léopold Sédar Senghor, although the latter's name never actually appears in the text. The group begins to write a draft letter of their appeal to this venerated character that is replete with imperfect subjunctives and passages in alexandrines with rich rhyming patterns. Moreover, for fear of being ridiculed by the prestigious members of the *Académie*, they spend hours thoroughly checking the letter's punctuation. An argument regarding the placement of a comma ensues and breaks the group up – the irony being that over the telephone such aspects of their letter's content

59 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 18.
60 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 18.
61 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, pp. 19–20.
62 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 23.

could not be seen or criticised, yet in their haste to perfect their script the tired advisors seem to have forgotten this.

Despite all of the painstaking effort, the plan to involve the *Académicien* is resoundingly rejected upon the discovery that this particular person has already provided posterity with his own maxim: *l'émotion est nègre comme la raison est hellène.* The accepted logic amongst the advisors is that a person is only permitted a single expression to mark their place in history 'sinon ça devient du bavardage creux, beaucoup de bruit pour rien'.[63] Indeed, Verre Cassé explains that in order to avoid confusion and emptiness 'les formules qui entrent dans l'Histoire sont courtes, brèves et incisives'.[64] He bemoans the eventual mixing up of 'who said what' as an unfortunate consequence of the way texts travel down through history, and gives his complaint a poignant critical edge when he complains that 'les gens oublient malheureusement qui en ont été les vrais auteurs et ne rendent plus à Césaire ce qui est à Césaire'.[65]

The biblical citation incorporated into Verre Cassé's narrative originally appears in the synoptic gospels.[66] In its original context, Jesus is alleged to have spoken these words in response to questions regarding whether or not Jews should cede to the Roman authorities or continue to resist taxation in Judaea. In Mabanckou's novel, 'Césaire' is also a reference to Aimé Césaire, in a play upon the French name for Julius Caesar (*Jules César*). The change in the spelling of César should alert a (French) reader unfamiliar with the history of the Négritude movement that the sentence contains an allusion to a context in addition to the Biblical one. As I have already mentioned, the paradox of parodic reappropriation is that its critical edge is always threatened by its complicit position within the discourse it denounces. Whilst the postcolonial aspects of this example of parodic appropriation are instilled in the scene through the history of Césaire's life and works, the

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63 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 25 Since 'beaucoup de bruit pour rien' is the French translation of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, Mabanckou's joke here is that the playwright contributed more than one expression!
64 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 25
65 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 25.
66 'They say unto him, Caesar's. Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's'. Matthew, 22.21.

reference is steeped in postmodern self-reflexive irony: Verre Cassé warns against forgetting the veritable authors of literary axioms whilst the citation from Zola's tract is left entirely unacknowledged.

Following his disgruntled commentary on textual ownership with regard to Aimé Césaire/Jules César, Verre Cassé goes on to describe how the counsellors then decide to write down different 'formulas' that have already succeeded in being recognisable and 'qui sont entrées dans la postérité de ce monde de merde'.[67] They then draw them out of a hat and present them in turn for the President's judgment. The tyrannical chief thus presides over a farcical performance of originality and authorship as line after line of renowned political and philosophical axioms are read aloud. With each repetition, rather than be impressed by the wisdom paraded in front of him, the President automatically dismisses with evident distaste and whimsical reasoning quotations from an international array of historic figures. These include Louis XIV, Lenin, Danton, Clemenceau, Pascal, Mac Mahon, Napoléon Bonaparte, Talleyrand, Martin Luther King, Shakespeare, Paul Biya, Yombi Opangault, Marx, Mitterrand, Cato the Elder, Pontius Pilate, and Jesus.

One way of looking at the example above is to see it as an illustration of pastiche, in which the writing's intertextuality plays with connotations of what Jameson calls 'pastness' to create a pseudo-historical depth from the mixture of aesthetic styles that displaces 'real' history.[68] This aspect of postmodernism is also evident in the farcical nature of the 'J'accuse' scene, in which Mabanckou seems to encourage the reader to laugh at the allusions to, and illusion of, history. These scenes seem to represent a general mockery of the notion of historical authority, one that fits a description of postmodernism made later in Jameson's work when he writes that:

> The postmodern thus invites us to indulge a somber mockery of historicity in general, wherein the effort at self-consciousness with which our own situation somehow completes

67 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 26.
68 Jameson, p. 20.

> the act of historical understanding, repeats itself drearily as in the worst kind of dreams, and juxtaposes, to its own pertinent philosophical repudiation of the very concept of self-consciousness, a grotesque carnival of the latter's various replays.[69]

In the final part of this scene, decisions are eventually made regarding the President's comeback speech. At five o'clock in the morning, one of his advisors supplies the *chef-d'état* with a final clause: *je vous ai compris*. Whilst the narrative does not make it explicit that this phrase is the defining sentence from one of Charles de Gaulle's major speeches on the French Empire, Mabanckou playfully hints that the advisor who supplied the solution was inspired by 'des documentaires en noir et blanc'.[70] There is no direct reference at all to De Gaulle or his famous appearance on the 4th June in Algiers in 1958.[71] Consequently the allusion may only be obvious to a select group of readers versed in colonial history, even if the phrase itself is perhaps familiar to many of Mabanckou's readers from France and Algeria. Mabanckou's ironically repeated image of the French president on the balcony of the Government of Algiers' general headquarters addressing the crowds gathered in the *Place du Forum* provides a further clue for readers who, by that point, have still not linked Chief Mingi's speech to a historical precedent. It appears in the narrator's description of the President delivering 'his' special formula with arms spread-eagled as if he were hugging a famously large tree:

> il a terminé son discours par les mots qu'il voulait à tout prix laisser à la postérité, on a su que c'étaient ces mots-là parce qu'il les a répétés à plusieurs reprises, ses bras ouverts comme s'il enlaçait un séquoia, et il a répété « je vous ai compris »[72]

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69 Jameson, pp. 64–65.
70 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 30.
71 Video footage of this speech is available on the *Fondation Charles de Gaulle* website. See 'Discours du 4 juin 1958 au Forum d'Alger' <http://www.charles-de-gaulle.com/l-homme-du-verbe/speeches/4-june-1958-speech-made-in-algiers.html> [accessed 1 March 2016].
72 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 32.

Here, the textual excerpt is embedded in the narrative in a way that renews its original meaning. This technique reappears in the conclusion to the passage of the 'J'accuse' episode in which Mabanckou illustrates how the juxtaposition of historic and fictional contexts can have a comical outcome. At the end of the passage, Verre Cassé describes how the political slogans gradually came to be recognised by the population of the fictionalised Congo as an 'in-joke' for their national community, and that 'pour plaisanter, nous autres de la plèbe disons souvent que « le ministre accuse, le président comprend »'.[73]

If the 'J'accuse' charade is notable for the author's use of intertexts to playfully challenge the authority invested in the image of the former French President, it also presents the fictional Congolese President's desire for posterity as a parody of the Western/European concern for authentic authorship and originality. In this way, Mabanckou constructs a pastiche of the act of textual appropriation itself. It is important to note that this is neither a wholly postmodern nor wholly postcolonial challenge within the context of Mabanckou's writing. On the one hand, it could be read in light of historical context as the type of textual borrowing described by the 'writing back' model. The appropriation and juxtaposition of Zola's text and the image of Charles de Gaulle – both iconic figures of French cultural history and identity – demonstrate a careful dual-coding of contextual information that points towards the unconscious lingering of French imperial power and influence in the countries of former colonies. On the other hand, the author's use of intertextuality in the 'J'accuse' scene undermines the idea of appropriation as a political act, unveiling it as a device that can be practised without any desire to subversively counter-attack the 'centre'.

The second, particularly funny, example of farce in Mabanckou's work occurs when one of the characters in *Verre cassé*, Casimir, appropriates the image of France in an especially irreverent style. In a nod to Rabelais, Mabanckou's narrator revels in the telling of a scatological scene in which Casimir and Robinette (both visitors to 'Le Crédit a

73 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, p. 32.

voyagé') compete in a pissing contest, at the end of which its champion, Casimir, has succeeded in drawing a map of France. On the muddy ground outside the bar, Casimir stands in triumph as 'ses urines orthodoxes tombaient en plein cœur de la ville de Paris'.[74] The critical edge to the scene is compounded by a comment that is voiced from the crowd. Above the applause can be heard a question regarding the 'autre petit dessin à côté de cette œuvre magnifique', to which the artist Casimir responds: 'c'est la Corse, imbécile'.[75] Verre Cassé describes how, following on from Casimir's comment, several members of the group that had gathered outside the bar discovered for the first time the existence of this island and wondered aloud who its President was, whether he was black or white, what type of state it was, and the name of its capital city.

The notion that Casimir's appropriation of the outlined image of France would be incomplete without the inclusion of Corisca and the apparently genuine curiosity that the island's supposed incorporation into France elicits from the crowd has significant, specifically postcolonial, political dimensions. Corsican independence is a highly controversial issue and one that has been fought for, often violently, by regional armed groups since the mid-1970s. The history and limits of France's political role in its overseas territories and domains is foregrounded by the inclusion of the island of Corsica into Casimir's carefully drawn map of the metropole but the image of France itself is appropriated in an 'inappropriate' way, given not only the nature of their contest but also the fact that Casimir only agreed to the contest because if he won he would be permitted to spend the night with Robinette. To put it another way, the recontextualised image is divested of its original authority as a symbol of the French *métropole*, the centre of colonial power, and the act of appropriation itself transformed into a farcical, magical gag.

My work in this chapter has built upon recent appraisals of Mabanckou's intertextual novels by critics such as Batchelor and Steemers, who share a concern for the

74 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé,* p. 104.
75 Mabanckou, *Verre cassé,* p. 105.

importance of the uplifting effect of the author's style, as well as an interest in the reader's ability to recognise the author's intertextual games. Their emphasis on the enjoyable effects of Mabanckou's works sheds light on the network of cultural codes and reading communities that enable intertextuality to be appreciated across cultural divides, which in turn puts a question mark over who outside an academic setting would be able to read *Verre cassé* and pick up on *every* intertextual reference. Ultimately, the intense use of other texts within his own raises questions about Mabanckou's preferred writing style, and, for that matter, the way he encourages his readers to read.

Another way of thinking about how Mabanckou constantly flags up his intertextuality with in-jokes is to see this device as a means of alerting the reader to the fact that the author's textual borrowing is not supposed to go unacknowledged. Rather, it is an integral part of the novel's originality. In other words, we could see the humorous quality created by Mabanckou's self-conscious, tongue-in-cheek highlighting of his own textual trickery as a kind of creative licence or a badge of literary authority that Mabanckou flashes at the reader throughout his texts. This is a paradoxical, even self-undermining, kind of 'authority', though, that stands in odd relation to the type of exaggeratedly unoriginal, nonsensical effect of Mabanckou's intertextual jokes.[76]

I have tried to convey how Mabanckou's intertextuality can produce a sense of levity for the reader, both when it is recognised and when it is not. In the next chapter, I will continue to investigate the intricacies inherent in the reception of parodic texts through an exploration of the way readers' prior knowledge of an author – and their recognition of certain aspects of the author's life within a novel – may influence their encounter with the text. By exploring the way that some postcolonial writers make fun of themselves in their own works, I aim to shed some light on the implications of postcolonial self-parody for critical claims that use selected parts of an author's biography to uphold arguments about a text's subversive aims.

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76 For a helpful analysis of plagiarism charges brought against postcolonial authors see Marilyn Randall, *Pragmatic Plagiarism: Authorship, Profit and Power* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2001), 159–188.

Chapter 3

Parodying a Postcolonial Persona

On performance, on the excitement of doing, on what literature creates by way of fun – that's where more of the emphasis should be.[1]

Alain Mabanckou, Calixthe Beyala and Dany Laferrière are three of the most commercially successful and highly mediatised authors writing in French today. In this chapter I will explore the ways in which these writers engage with their high profiles using two different types of self-parody: literary and performative. In addition to being a source of humour, self-parody crystallises questions about the extent to which an author's personal and political life intervene in the interpretation of his or her fictional texts because it is a device that relies upon an awareness of an author's biographical context or his or her previous works. By contrasting Mabanckou's *Black Bazar* (2009) and two texts by Dany Laferrière, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) and *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (2008), with Beyala's self-referential novel *L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel* (2007), in this chapter I will examine the way that self-parodic techniques enable these writers to draw attention to the conflicting expectations that are raised by their position as famous postcolonial novelists.

Beyala, Laferrière and Mabanckou are twenty-first century 'cultural celebrities'[2] who have harnessed the power of the Internet to reach an international following of readers, bloggers, 'Tweeters', Facebook users, and YouTube viewers.[3] On the one hand, they have

1 Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), p. 33.
2 See Graham Huggan's work on Margaret Atwood in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 210.
3 Mabanckou and Beyala have successful blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts that are updated regularly.

each cultivated a media persona that could be seen as a marker of their assimilation and acceptance in mainstream French culture and additionally French-Canadian culture in the case of Laferrière. On the other hand, their fiction is routinely lauded for its anti-imperial, anti-colonial subversion that supposedly explodes stereotypes and mythologies about race, gender and immigration to work against the social and political prejudices of neo-colonial dominance.

The tension that results from being touted as a 'periphery' or 'marginal' author whose writing is set against the power of the ethnic majority culture whilst also enjoying a high level of recognition and visibility within that same majority culture was first discussed by Graham Huggan, whose study *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001) was influential in the field of postcolonial criticism. In his examination of the literature and marketing of authors such as Salman Rushdie and Margaret Atwood, Huggan shined a light on the pressures of the publishing industry and the continued demand for the exotic that goes into the making of a postcolonial author's success. Lydie Moudileno, amongst others, has applied Huggan's theories to work by contemporary writers of French expression.

In the conclusion to her article from 2011 in which she pitches Beyala's celebrity status against the more reclusive figure of Maire NDiaye, Moudileno suggests that questions about the role of biography in the management of a postcolonial author's fame are equally pertinent in the case of many other novelists, pinpointing Alain Mabanckou as a potential author for further study in this area.[4] Picking up on Moudileno's suggestion that Mabanckou's literary stardom could provide a useful point of comparison to Beyala's prominence, then, I want to examine the extent to which their literary works might be seen to interact with their public personae, using Dany Laferrière as a further case study to explore the potential for self-parody to poke fun at the paratexts surrounding a fictional work.

In an effort to differentiate between self-parodic strategies as clearly as possible I have divided this chapter into two parts. The first focuses on literary self-parody. In this

4 Lydie Moudileno, 'Fame, Celebrity and the Conditions of Visibility of the Postcolonial Writer', *Yale French Studies*, 120 (2011), 62–74 (p. 73).

section my analysis of texts by Mabanckou and Laferrière is informed by theories elucidated by Richard Poirier. I argue that these authors' self-parodic play with their position as postcolonial celebrities is achieved in their writing via the combination of two specific techniques: autofiction and metafiction. First, I deal with the way autofiction enables these authors to create self-directed jokes at their own expense, aimed primarily at their media personae. Second, I suggest that through the mixture of autofiction with metafiction these two quintessentially postmodern self-referential devices function in a way that might be seen to mock ideas that get built up around these authors' works by publishers and in literary criticism regarding their status as 'representative' spokespeople for a particular culture, nation, or diaspora.

Next, I juxtapose the works examined by Mabanckou and Laferrière with the self-parodic strategies of Calixthe Beyala. I start by looking at how Beyala has presented herself in the media and draw upon Nicki Hitchcott's study of Beyala's strategic self-positioning. I aim to show how Hitchcott's analysis of Beyala's behaviour as a type of parodic performance is persuasive, but I go on to argue that Beyala has been less successful at creating a literary counterpart to her self-positioning in the press. Through an analysis of Beyala's self-reflexive work *L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel* (2007), I will try to illustrate how parts of this text have the potential to be read as an attempt by Beyala to poke fun at the way she has been portrayed in the French media. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the novel lacks a clear sense of self-deprecation that helps readers to pick up on the author's self-directed jests and, as a result, much of the book's humour misses the mark.

'First-persona' jokes

Literary self-parody was theorised by Richard Poirier in an article that first appeared in *The Partisan Review* in the summer of 1968. 'The Politics of Self-Parody' then became a chapter in his collection of essays entitled *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life*, first published in 1971. Writing about performance

as a possible way for an author to animate his or her own work, Poirier concentrates on what Edward Said describes as the 'staginess' of some writers. In other words, Poirier looks at how the identity of artists, singers, and writers is performed through their work. As Said explains, Poirier 'accentuates the uncertainties, the unhoused and unco-optable energies in such writers as Eliot and Joyce' and in doing so 'places much greater emphasis than is normal not only on parody and pastiche as literary modes, but also on self-parody and self-consciousness'.[5] In a move away from conventional conceptions of parody, Poirier defines self-parody as a new type of parodic play in which a text turns inwardly to mock itself. It is a style of writing:

> that makes fun of itself *as it goes along*. It proposes not the rewards so much as the limits of its own procedures; it shapes itself around its own dissolvents, it calls into question not any particular literary structure so much as the enterprise, the activity itself of creating any literary form, of empowering an idea with a style.[6]

Self-parodic literature retains its critical role, Poirier insists, but differs from traditional parody which is directed outward, for example at another author, genre, or style. Instead, the literature of self-parody is 'quite unsure of the relevance of such standards' and 'makes fun of the effort even to verify them by the act of writing'.[7] Linda Hutcheon has described how self-parody as a concept can be used to refer to the type of self-mockery by an artist of his or her own mannerisms, such as Coleridge's 'On a Ruined Cottage in a Romantic Country' or Swinburne's 'Nephelidia'. It can also, however, be understood as a 'way of creating a form out of the questioning of the very act of aesthetic production'.[8] Due to its self-reflexive nature, this style of parody has come to be seen as a defining trait of postmodern literature.

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5 Edward Said, Forward to Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self*, pp. xi–xii.
6 Poirier, p. 28.
7 Poirier, pp. 27–28.
8 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, 2nd edn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 10.

As a result of the mixture of autofictional and metafictional techniques in *Black Bazar*, *Comment faire l'amour*, and *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, we can read the narrators of these texts as parodied versions of their celebrity authors. The first thing to make clear, then, is that the texts I look at here by Mabanckou and Laferrière can be considered autofictional. Before going any further in my argument about why these texts encourage us to link their protagonists to their authors it may be useful to consider briefly the rather blurry theoretical outlines of autofiction. Since the 1970s, the complexities of the relationship between author and narrator, and by extension between the genres of fiction and non-fiction, novel and autobiography, have been the centre of an ongoing debate in literary criticism. Over the last four decades a plethora of terms have appeared in attempts to differentiate between types of writing that reference reality and the author's biography in fictional contexts. I list a fraction of them here to illustrate the extent to which the idea of autofiction has proved difficult to define: life-writing, self-writing, autobiography, surfiction, *écriture de soi*, *otobiographie*, *roman autobiographique*, *bi-autobiographie*, *nouvelle autobiographie*, *roman faux*, postmodern autobiography, automythobiography, egoliterature, and, of course, autofiction.[9]

Some clarity on what the latter term entails has been offered by Karen Ferreira-Meyers, whose recently published study compares autofictional techniques in works by three contemporary authors.[10] In an article dealing specifically with the notion of a particular 'African' style of autofiction, Ferreira-Meyers explains that the term is associated with postmodern figures, particularly the autobiographer and life-writing critic Serge Doubrovsky, who coined the neologism on the back cover of his 1977 work *Fils*.[11] Doubrovsky's original description of the word reveals something of its playful nature: he describes being inspired about the notion of an author recounting his life in fiction whilst in

9 This list isn't exhaustive. For more detail on the variety of difference terms that have been used to define this new genre see Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction: une aventure du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), p. 19; and Karen Ferreria-Meyers, 'In Between the Collective and the Individual: African Autofiction', in *Autobiography as a Writing Strategy in Postcolonial Literature*, ed. by Benaouda Lebdai (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambidge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 134–160 (p. 136).
10 Karen Ferreira-Meyers, *L'Autofiction d'Amélie Nothomb, Calixthe Beyala et Nina Bouraoui: de la théorie à la pratique de l'autofiction* (Saarbrücken: Éditions Universitaires Européennes, 2012).
11 Karen Ferreira-Meyers, 'In Between the Collective and the Individual: African Autofiction', p. 150.

his car, hence *auto*fiction.[12] Doubrovsky has continued to reaffirm that his concept is 'the postmodern form of autobiography'[13] but it has also been read as a response to Philippe Lejeune's exploration of the relationship between author, narrator, and protagonist in *Le Pacte autobiographique* (1975), in which he threw down the gauntlet with the question: 'Le héros d'un roman déclaré tel, peut-il avoir le même nom que l'auteur ?'.[14] It is worth noting that there has been a recent surge of literary-critical interest in the use of autofictional techniques to broach the construction of identity in writing by postcolonial authors. The recent appearance of two collections of essays on autobiographical and autofictional writing in contemporary French-language literature testifies to this critical turn towards the games of first-person writing in postcolonial and postmodern contexts.[15]

So, as I have just mentioned, one of the characteristic traits of autofictional texts has been identified as the narrator and author sharing the same name as well as the use of the first-person pronoun. In this way, autofictional literature creates a slippage between narrator and author and it is this slippage that allows an author (potentially) to discuss him- or herself. In Laferrière's case, the name of his narrator, Vieux, is a childhood nickname that comes from 'Vieux Os' which was his grandmother's name for him, as we discover in later autobiographic works such as *Le Charme des après-midi sans fin* (1997). It is not so obvious that 'Fessologue' should be read as a pseudonym for Mabanckou, but *Black Bazar* can still be considered autofictional. In her work on African autofiction, Karen Ferreira-Meyers includes texts in her analysis that do not respect the author-narrator-protagonist alignment but where 'the paratext assists the reader to identify the author behind the narrator/character'.[16] Indeed, three main points of paratextual information encourage readers to locate Mabanckou's voice in Fessologue's words.

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12 Ferreira-Meyers, 'In Between the Collective', p. 138.
13 Ferreira-Meyers, 'In Between the Collective', p. 142.
14 Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 31.
15 C.f. Adrienne Angelo and Erika Fülöp, eds, *Protean Selves: First-Person Voices in Twenty-First-Century French and Francophone Narratives* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014); and Benaouda Lebdai, ed., *Autobiography as a Writing Strategy in Postcolonial Literature* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).
16 Karen Ferreira-Meyers, 'In Between the Collective', p. 134.

First, Fessologue describes himself as the son of Pauline Kengué, explaining that 'j'étais son petit-fils, le fils de sa fille Pauline Kengué'.[17] Readers of other works by Mabanckou such as *Les Lumières de Pointe-Noire* (2013) and *Demain j'aurai vingt ans* (2010) may remember that Pauline Kengué is the name of his mother; indeed, Mabanckou has dedicated all of his books to date to his mother. Second, the author's Sapeur style, and in particular his penchant for jaunty hats, coincides with Fessologue's Sapeur fashion sense. Mabanckou appears in Sapeur attire frequently as a guest on French television chat shows and news programmes. He is also well-known amongst the African diaspora in France for promoting and producing the rumba group 'Black Bazar' and for making a cameo appearance in their music video 'Black Bazar Face A' alongside a cohort of dancing Sapeurs. Mabanckou has himself suggested that the narrator-protagonist-author triangulation in *Black Bazar* does not require much detective work, emphasising the way that La Sape assists in this: 'Le narrateur de *Black Bazar* est un apprenti écrivain, c'est un Congolais comme moi, et il aime les cols à trois boutons : je porte toujours les cols à trois boutons ! Le rapprochement est vite fait'.[18] Indeed, so accustomed are the French public to seeing Mabanckou dressed in fashionable gear on television that he recounts an anecdote in *Le Sanglot de l'homme noir* (2012) about his identity being challenged when he was not wearing his trademark hat whilst exercising in a Parisian gym.[19] Sapeur style is perhaps not exactly what Gérard Genette had in mind when he described the type of 'common knowledge' that shapes the way a reader engages with a text when he took Proust's Jewish heritage and homosexuality as examples of biographical facts that many readers are aware of before beginning *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Nevertheless, it seems that Mabanckou's image as a Sapeur has been so widely diffused that it is likely that his narrator – a similarly

17 Alain Mabanckou, *Black Bazar* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), p. 101.
18 Philippe Delaroche and Liger Baptiste, 'Entretien avec Alain Mabanckou', *L'Express* (Paris, 1 February 2009) <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/entretien-avec-alain-mabanckou_815535.html> [accessed 28 March 2015].
19 Alain Mabanckou, *Le Sanglot de l'homme noir* (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

flamboyant dresser – will be linked to him in this way, and that, consequently, Mabanckou's Sapeur status has become a type of paratextual 'fact'.[20]

The third reason that *Black Bazar* can be seen as autofictional is the narrative's playful inclusion of references to cultural landmarks. For instance, the Afro-Cuban bar Jip's in the heart of Paris that Fessologue regularly visits is also where Mabanckou 'holds court' when he is interviewed by journalists.[21] Similarly, the character of Louis-Philippe is routinely read as a reference to the Haitian author Louis-Philippe Dalembert. In their comparison of Mabanckou's work to Sami Tchak's *Hermina* (2003) Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier have argued that the allusion to Louis-Philippe is a type of intertextual trick that is 'easily identifiable' and which gives Dalembert 'a fictional life'. According to Cazenave and Célérier 'the text becomes an interesting interplay between what is real and what is fictional', in view of how Mabanckou locates the meeting between Fessologue and Dalembert at a Parisian bookstore, Le Rideau Rouge, which is 'an actual bookstore in the eighteenth *arrondissement* of Paris, where Mabanckou has had book signings, and on the website of which an interview of his appears'.[22]

In light of the fact that Mabanckou's text does appear to have certain autofictional traits, the following two examples illustrate the way his narrator-protagonist offers a comic framing of the author's media persona. Louis-Philippe plays an important role in the narrative as a mentor to the narrator, acting as a foil to Fessologue's inexperience. He is also one of the characters to make fun of Fessologue's desire to be perceived by the public as a serious writer. At one point, he advises Fessologue to wear glasses as he embarks upon his new career, in order to be more convincing in his new role. He tells Fessologue that to be taken seriously as a writer he must wear glasses 'pour qu'on sente qu'il travaille, qu'il ne fait que ça, qu'il sue, les gens ne croient pas que toi tu es écrivain si tu n'as pas de lunettes de

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20 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 8.
21 'Prince of the Absurd. The Mad, Bad Fiction of Congo's Alain Mabanckou', *The Economist* (London, 7 July 2011) <http://econ.st/n6qKiq> [accessed 3 April 2015].
22 Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier, *Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 180.

myopie'.[23] Fessologue takes him at his word and goes out to buy a pair. When Louis-Philippe next sees him, he bursts out laughing at the way Fessologue has tried to 'coller à l'image que le public se fait de l'écrivain': he has completely unnecessarily bought himself a very expensive pair of clear glasses from the rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, in true Sapeur style, not realising that Louis-Philippe had only been pulling his leg.[24]

On another occasion, Fessologue rants about how annoying contemporary authors are when they are in the limelight. His irritation stems from the pervasive presence of writers on television who think they know everything, according to Fessologue. He admits that as a result of his aversion to TV-friendly writers, he has restricted his reading material to works by authors who are already dead. We can read the follow passage on two levels, then, the first being the narrator's disgruntled claim about the arrogance of publicised writers, and the second being Mabanckou's self-conscious mockery of his own fame:

> je ne lis que les morts, les vivants m'énervent, ils m'agacent. Quand tu les vois à la télé ils te font des discours sur ce qu'ils écrivent et ils sont satisfaits comme s'ils avaient trouvé la pierre philosophale après avoir résolu la quadrature du cercle ou rempli le tonneau des Danaïdes le doigt dans le nez.[25]

Fessologue goes on to note with mounting disdain for contemporary writers how much easier it is to discuss the work of dead ones, because in their case the writing process has already been completed and their reputation established. In this way, Mabanckou's self-awareness of his prominence on television panels and radio shows and about his pronouncements on topics such as French foreign policy in Africa and racism in Europe is comically channelled through Fessologue's distaste for the attention-seeking authors he sees on his television screen.

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23 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 186.
24 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 186.
25 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, pp. 161–162.

Television is an important way to gain status and some form of consecration as an author, at least according to Fessologue's friends. Appearing on television and having a well-liked media persona validates an author's status. When word gets out that Fessologue wants to write a book his pals at Jip's warn him that better qualified and more talented people have already succeeded at this venture. They refer to the well-spoken writers who appear on TV shows, who they claim are 'nés pour ça, ils ont été élevés dans ça, alors que nous autres les nègres, c'est pas notre dada, l'écriture'.[26] One friend in particular, Roger Le Franco-Ivoirien, opposes Fessologue's writing project because he sees the competition from white authors already well known in the media as too strong for Fessologue to take on. He highlights a worrying type of response to postcolonial literature that calls to mind Jacques Chevrier's claim about African authors being destined to follow in the footsteps of Western precedents.[27] Roger's argument also highlights the role of the media in contemporary culture in providing a way of gaining not just celebrity status but a form of verification and publicity that was previously reserved for white male authors.

Considering his current celebrity standing, it is important to note that Laferrière – a media veteran, having now been in the limelight for almost thirty years – was one of the first black authors to penetrate the homogeneously white landscape of television in Quebec in the 1980s. His media career was launched shortly after the appearance of his first novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, following which he revelled in the chance to appear routinely on screen. His became a widely recognised face on the French Canadian televisual scene after he was taken on by the show *Quatre Saisons* in 1986 as the first black television presenter in Quebec, reading the weather forecast with characteristic comic flair.[28]

In his literary début, Laferrière seems to have amused himself in encouraging, anticipating, and then eluding questions aroused by the intersection between his own life and

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26 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, pp. 13–14.
27 Jacques Chevrier, *Littérature Nègre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1984), p. 118.
28 For an example of Laferrière's unique style of presenting the weather see the video clip 'TQS – Le Grand Journal (météo)', online video recording, YouTube (16 November 2012; originally broadcast 1986) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4Z90sC4bSk> [accessed 22 March 2016].

his narrator's. Vieux is a black man who is writing his first novel and who describes this experience along with snippets about his social and sex life in Montreal in the mid-1980s. Of course, when Laferrière wrote the novel he did not have a media persona to parody. It would be unreasonable to argue, therefore, that he intended *Comment faire* as an assault on his actual treatment and presentation in the media or in the press. Yet the predictive nature of his self-directed jokes when envisaging his reaction to commercial and critical success makes the fact that he forecasts his behaviour in front of the camera an even more startlingly innovative self-parodic move. The best example of this occurs near the end of Laferrière's novel, when Vieux dreams about the experience of being interviewed for a television show (aptly named *Noir sur Blanc*) by the fictionalised version of television personality and well-known Canadian journalist and broadcaster Denise Bombardier.

Vieux imagines being asked a question about his book – *Paradis du Dragueur Nègre* – that strikes at the heart of much of the critical debate that developed around Laferrière's own text: its autobiographical status. 'Est-ce vrai?' Miz Bombardier inquires, after having connected some points about Vieux's life in Montreal with the narrator's world in his novel.[29] Vieux conceitedly acts confused, as if he had not deliberately developed such a comparison in his work which, in true hall-of-mirrors fashion, is about 'un type, un Nègre, qui vit avec un copain qui passe son temps couché sur un Divan à ne rien faire sinon à méditer, à lire le Coran, à écouter du jazz et à baiser quand ça vient'.[30] Vieux replies that 'Ce n'est que pure coïncidence'.[31] Laferrière has been prompted to make the same sort of statement with regard to his own narrator. In an interview in 2010, the author stated outright that he thinks 'it's a mistake for readers to think factually, that the author of *How to Make*

29 Dany Laferrière, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher/Le Serpent à Plumes, 1999 [1985]), p. 160.
30 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 62.
31 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 161. Interestingly, in the interview with Denise Bombardier that aired on the 8th November 1985 following the publication of the novel, the author is not questioned on this part of his work. Footage of this interview is available through the *Société Radio-Canada* website, in the Radio-Canada archives. See 'Le Fantasme selon Dany Laferrière' (8 November 1985) <http://archives.radio-canada.ca/societe/litterature/clips/14084/> [accessed 7 May 2015].

Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired was a young Haitian writer'.[32] More recently he seems to have softened his stance towards the assumption that Vieux is a mouthpiece for the author, explaining that 'Au début, je me fâchais contre les gens qui me demandaient si le narrateur et moi ne formions qu'une seule personne. Et puis, je me suis rendu compte que c'est la question fondamentale de la littérature. Sinon on n'accorderait aucune importance aux romans'.[33]

What Laferrière calls the 'fundamental question' about the extent to which the 'je' of Vieux is the 'je' of Laferrière has been circumvented in some critical examinations of his text. Dennis Essar, for instance, has argued that because of its *mise-en-abyme* structure and multiple overlaps with Laferrière's biography it is acceptable to assume that Vieux speaks directly for Laferrière. For Essar, the work involved in delimiting the worlds of fiction and reality in Laferrière's writing is too taxing. He states: 'It would be fastidious to specify at every step in this study that a distinction is to be made between the author and his at least semi-fictitious first-person narrators'. Instead of taking up this approach, though, Essar goes on to justify the conflation of Laferrière and Vieux on the grounds that 'the links between the life-stories of the author and his narrators are so extensive and so precise that in all instances the term "narrator" as applied here to these novels can be understood to mean Laferrière the author speaking about himself, although at times taking liberties with truth and reality'.[34]

Daniel Coleman's argument that Laferrière's text should be understood as a 'metaparody' that creates an occasional 'metafictional slippage'[35] between the author and Vieux provides a more nuanced approach to the problem of the narrator's authorial identity. Coleman asks whether or not, in scenes in which Vieux is the victim of his own parodic

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32 'Dany Laferrière discusses his translated novels "I am a Japanese writer" and "How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired"' (Toronto, 2 November 2010) <http://thetorontoquarterly.blogspot.ch/2010/11/dany-laferriere-discusses-his.html> [accessed 12 March 2015].
33 Arnaud Robert, 'Dany Laferrière : J'écris comme je vis', *Le Temps* (Lausanne, 23 March 2013) <http://www.letemps.ch/culture/2013/03/22/dany-laferriere-j-ecris-vis> [accessed 12 March 2015].
34 Dennis Essar, 'Time and Space in Dany Laferrière's Autobiographical Haitian Novels', *Callaloo*, 22, 4 (1999), 930–946 (p. 931).
35 Daniel Coleman, *Masculine Migrations: Reading the Postcolonial Male in 'New Canadian' Narratives* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 54.

playfulness, the embarrassed Vieux character also extends to include Laferrière 'who may or may not have misjudged his choice of mythologies with a book titled *How to Make Love to a Negro [Without Getting Tired]*?'.[36] Coleman's approach is innovative in its application of a reconceptualisation of parodic expression to test theories about the subversive effects of literary parody. On closer inspection, though, metaparody may not be the best framework for understanding the text's ambiguity, since metaparody is defined against parody using three strict criteria. Plain (i.e. non-meta) parody must first evoke or indicate another utterance, a 'target', 'object' or 'original utterance'; second, it must be in some way antithetical to this target; and third, it must have a 'higher semantic authority than the original', which must be made clear.[37] The main problem with metaparody, then, is that it requires us to define parody too rigidly, particularly with regard to what Gary Saul Morson in his paper outlining the concept sees as its need for a 'higher semantic authority'. As such, Morson's theory relies upon an artificially high standard of how explicit and trustworthy the authority grounding parody should be.

For some critics, there is simply no need to waste time wondering which parts of Vieux's narrative are true and which are not. For others, it will be important not to align the author and the narrator too neatly. Whilst a certain amount of slippage between narrator and author is essential for the textual self-parody to 'reach' the author, eclipsing Vieux with Laferrière completely would destroy some of the self-directed humour in the novel that plays upon the undecidability of the dual target. In other words, we might think of the Laferrière-Vieux relationship as another dimension to the author's playful toying with his own persona. With this autofictional technique, Laferrière manages to make fun of the way he appears in public and in so doing to shed light on the discrepancy between the fictionalised image of himself projected in the media and his off-camera personality. His autofiction could be conceived of, then, as a type of 'now-you-see-me, now-you-don't' game for the reader

36 Coleman, pp. 64–5.
37 Gary Saul Morson, 'Parody, History and Metaparody', in *Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*, ed. by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 63–86 (p. 67).

speculating on the voice behind the narrative (is it Vieux? is it Laferrière?) that forces the reader to assess the discrepancies between the text's genre, his or her knowledge of the author's biography, and the information on offer about the author in the media.[38] The self-parodic text can therefore be seen to reinforce the idea that fiction is no longer the privileged site for fictions, which is evident in all areas of everyday contemporary life as Poirier pointed out with reference to press conferences by Kissinger and speeches by Nixon.[39]

In some ways, Laferrière's text is also comparable to what Christopher Prendergast has described as Proust's self-reflexive jokes. Prendergast explains how Proust plays around with his first name in *À la recherche* in a way that develops beyond self-parody and into a deeper critique of self-writing by erasing the boundary between the author and the narrator. Although Prendergast makes it clear that *À la recherche* is neither autofiction nor a *roman à clef*,[40] his explanation of Proustian jokes still helps us to envisage how an author can potentially make fun not only of himself but similarly of his writing project through a playful use of his first name: 'If Proust is effectively telling us that the barrier separating author and narrator is not secure, then the way is open to considering the extent to which jokes at the narrator's expense, however indirect, are also jokes at Proust's expense, and, moreover, not as casual asides or impromptu self-parody but as modes of skeptical critique'.[41]

Through their 'first-persona' jokes targeting their public image, both Laferrière and Mabanckou prompt their readers to evaluate the extent to which their presentation in the media should be taken as a 'real' representation of themselves. Indeed, Katelyn Knox has argued that Fessologue's positioning as a 'native informant' at Jip's who notes down details of life in the Parisian diaspora in his diary for a foreign audience is a deliberate and 'cunning' move by Mabanckou to highlight the way that African authors are 'packaged'. Based on the way that the novel invites an autobiographical reading and simultaneously calls

38 This is a reference to the idea of a 'now-you-see-me' game from Christopher Prendergast's chapter on 'Proustian Jokes' in *Mirages and Mad Beliefs: Proust the Skeptic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 29–59 (p. 35).
39 Poirier, *The Performing Self*, p. 30.
40 Prendergast, p. 32.
41 Prendergast, pp. 35–6.

into question the notion of authenticity and the lens through which the reader is approaching the text, Knox argues that 'the novel's literary *sape* similarly anticipates and subverts the reading strategies to which it will be subjected and undermines the notion of the ''real me'' often imputed onto francophone authors'.[42] Both Mabanckou and Laferrière self-consciously draw attention to the fact that they have contributed to the manufacturing of a certain image of themselves as writers that has been projected in the press and by the media. Their self-parody also highlights the way that other intermediaries have been part of the production of their public image. This leads to an issue that I shall consider in the next section of this chapter, concerning the way that these authors can be seen to comment caustically on their promotion as 'representative' writers by combining the technique of autofiction with that of metafiction.

Writing as performance

In addition to poking fun at their public personae, Laferrière and Mabanckou also use their alter-ego authors to undermine the authority of authenticity bestowed upon them as postcolonial writers. This is achieved through the device of metafiction, which, unlike autofiction, is a fairly straightforward notion. It is, in short, 'art about art'.[43] It can be linked to the concept of literary self-parody insofar as it designates a type of writing that discusses itself, enabling a text to make fun of itself '*as it goes along*'. It also fits within the framework of literary self-parody put forward in *The Performing Self* in the sense that each novel's trajectory is based on the conception and completion of the narrator's novel, and, as a result, the narratives have minimal plots.[44] It is through the *mise-à-nu* of the writing process that the narrators of *Comment faire l'amour*, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, and *Black Bazar* divulge information about their motives and methods that can be seen to highlight

42 Katelyn Knox, 'Selling (out) on the Black Market: *Black Bazar*'s Literary *Sape*', *Research in African Literature*, 46, 2 (2015), 52–69 (p. 59).
43 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 10.
44 Poirier, *The Performing Self*, p. 36.

comically their status as 'representative representatives'[45] of a particular nation, culture, or diaspora.

In *Comment faire l'amour*, Vieux's experience of the act of writing is documented with minute precision as Laferrière's own text unfolds. The reader is thus subjected to the quirky experience of reading a book about a book that is being written as they read. This mirroring between the two texts gives rise to some playful sequences in the narrative, for instance when Laferrière opens a chapter as Vieux closes his. At the start of Laferrière's fifteenth chapter Vieux begins with the line: 'Juste au moment où je terminais ce chapitre, Bouba est entré avec une fille superbe'.[46] The act of writing does not always come easily for Vieux. He frequently complains about writer's block and describes his procrastination and painfully slow progress. On one occasion after three hours of staring at a blank page he gives up and decides to spring clean his apartment, noting sarcastically that 'comme quoi le génie peut s'exprimer partout'.[47] He also casts doubt on the prestige of his work-in-progress by referring to his writing as scraps of paper – 'Une sorte de fourre-tout autobiographique où se retrouvent, pêle-mêle, début de roman, journal incomplet, rendez-vous manqués' – that he plans to burn in the sink.[48] At other points in the narrative he talks about his work as a collection of fantasies and 'pas vraiment un roman'[49] and his roommate Bouba seems genuinely surprised at the idea that Vieux is actually writing a book. In the final stages of his project, Vieux puts a note up on his door that is steeped in ironic self-mockery: '« Ne dérangez pas le grand écrivain, il est en train d'écrire son ultime chef-d'œuvre »'.[50] This makeshift sign mockingly attests to an outpouring of creative energy behind Vieux's closed door but he has in fact locked himself in his room for days with several crates of Molson beer, three bottles of wine, boxes of Ronzoni spaghetti, and a kilo of potatoes for sustenance in an attempt to try to force himself to finish his 'masterpiece'.

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45 Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 110.
46 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 147.
47 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 54.
48 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 61.
49 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 62
50 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 153.

Vieux's perseverance is eventually rewarded with a completed manuscript. Its importance becomes clear on the last page of Laferrière's work, in which Vieux describes how he is pinning all of his hopes on the book which he sees now 'là, sur la table, à côté de la vieille Remington, dans un gros classeur rouge'.[51] The typewriter in this final scene, placed next to the manuscript, signifies its equally weighted importance. One of Laferrière's motifs, in *Comment faire* it takes Vieux two pages to describe his decision-making process about which typewriter to purchase. He is overtly self-conscious, mocking his own naivety as he is drawn in by the idea of using a typewriter formerly owned by a famous author.

In *Black Bazar*, Fessologue likewise decides to write on a typewriter in a bid to imitate 'real' authors. In a scene in which Mabanckou pokes fun at the prestige associated with the profession of writing, he describes Fessologue's first conversation with Louis-Philippe regarding the merits of different types of 'Face B' (i.e. women's posteriors). Inspired by this riveting exchange, Fessologue heads out the following day to get a typewriter in order to copy Louis-Philippe: 'Le lendemain je suis allé acheter une machine à écrire à la porte de Vincennes parce que moi j'aime pas les ordinateurs, parce que je voulais faire comme les vrais écrivains qui déchiraient les pages, les raturaient, s'interrompaient pour changer le ruban de leur machine. . .'.[52]

For Vieux, the totemic force of a typewriter belonging to a famous author is irresistible. Anyone would think themselves a writer, he admits, if they were working on a machine that used to belong to Chester Himes, James Baldwin or Henry Miller.[53] Yet even armed with his celebrity typewriter (he selects the Himes) Vieux is self-conscious and defensive about his abilities as an author. He anticipates the accusation that he is writing purely for profit by pre-emptively stating that his main aim is to get rich and famous.[54] Mocking his own pretensions to become the next James Baldwin and jesting about dreaming

51 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 169.
52 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, pp. 166–67.
53 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 60.
54 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 97.

'comme vous et moi'[55] of emulating Ernest Hemingway, Vieux is scathingly sarcastic about his own literary ambitions.

When he does eventually use his typewriter, Vieux gives the reader a taste of the distilled process-orientated writing mode that Linda Hutcheon has identified as typical of postmodern metafiction, although it is worth bearing in mind her caveat that self-reflexivity is not necessarily a purely postmodern device.[56] Vieux's exposure of the act of writing appears in the form of chronicles in which he pares down the text to his own immediate view of the world, detailing life in his room at 3670 rue St. Denis in order to foreground the almost mechanical process of writing. Interspersed between a section of dialogue and Vieux's recounting of a dream, these segments have a detached quality as excerpts from Vieux's text that appear in Laferrière's own:

> UNE CHRONIQUE DE MA CHAMBRE AU 3670, RUE SAINT-DENIS (description faite avec l'accord de ma vieille Remington 22).
>
> J'écris: LIT.
>
> Je vois: matelas poisseux, drap crasseux, sommier grinçant, Divan gondolé.
>
> Je pense: dormir (Bouba dort douze heures d'affilée), baiser (Miz Sophisticated Lady), rêvasser au lit (avec Miz Littérature), écrire au lit (le *Paradis du Dragueur Nègre*), lire au lit (Miller, Cendrars, Bukowski).[57]

A second, more elaborate, chronicle appears two pages later and is basically an extended version of the first. Entitled with the same block capitals 'NOUVELLE CHRONIQUE DE MA CHAMBRE AU 3670, RUE SAINT-DENIS (description faite avec l'accord de ma Remington 22)', this time Vieux begins with a inventory of his bathroom 'J'écris:

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55 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 54.
56 Hutcheon goes into her reasons for the choice of 'metafictional' in her introduction to the work *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1984) but what it boils down to is her concern that the term postmodern is too inclusive and extensive to address the particular type of self-conscious narrative she focuses on in her analysis.
57 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 108.

TOILETTES'.[58] With painstaking patience Vieux goes on to enumerate every item in his bathroom.

He continues, methodically, with his lists. The author's technique here incurs quite deliberately what Poirier warns is a major risk of self-parody and one that he claims 'can't be ignored': boredom. Taking as his paradigm Joyce's *Ulysses*, Poirier contends that self-parodic texts are 'at times boring on purpose and for too long'.[59] At a certain point the attention of the average reader of *Comment faire* might start to wander, especially when they broach Vieux's next list, which is compiled of the contents of his fridge. 'J'écris: RÉFRIGÉRATEUR', he writes before he details what he sees outside his window ('J'écris: FENÊTRE'), then turns to the conversation being had between Bouba and Miz Suicide around the stove ('J'écris: RÉCHAUD À ALCOOL'), then looks over at the couch ('J'écris: DIVAN'), mentions the music ('J'écris: JAZZ'), goes through his reading material ('J'écris: CAISSE DE BOUQUINS'), and, finally, after running through an international and intimidating list of authors,[60] Vieux returns his attention to his typewriter: 'J'écris : MACHINE À ÉCRIRE. Je vois ma vieille Remington 22 en train de taper tout ça'.[61] By bringing the focus back to the act of writing and its instrument, Laferrière's text highlights the act of its own creation and so fits within the framework of self-parodic literature that makes fun of itself 'as it goes along'. The chronicles can also be read metaphorically, as their emphasis on Vieux's physical limitations suggests that the writer is confined to his immediate surroundings in a way that resists being situated as a representative of a wider culture or nation.

Laferrière's self-mockery about his own status as a postcolonial author reaches its peak in *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. This text, published over two decades after *Comment faire*, displays elements of what Poirier called a 'parody of literary creation' epitomised by

58 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 110.
59 Poirier, *The Performing Self*, p. 35.
60 Hemingway, Miller, Cendrars, Bukowski, Freud, Proust, Cervantes, Borges, Cortazar, Dos Pasos, Mishima, Apollinaire, Ducharme, Cohen, Villon, Lévy Beaulieu, Fennario, Himes, Baldwin, Wright, Pavese, Aquin, Quevedo, Ousmane, J.-S. Alexis, Roumain, G. Roy, De Quincey, Marquez, Jong, Alejo Carpentier, Atwood, Asturias, Amado, Fuentes, Kerouac, Corso, Handke, Limonov, Yourcenar.
61 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, pp. 110–112.

Borges's 'Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote'.[62] In *Je suis un écrivain japonais* Laferrière's subject is a narrator who denies writing a book entitled *Je suis un écrivain japonais* for the entire length of the narrative. In this behind-the-scenes account of life as a famous postcolonial author the narrator, who never identifies himself, is a successful writer living in Montreal with affiliations in Haiti. He describes with astonishment and amusement how much sway his biographical backstory has in the publishing industry. Laferrière's narrator takes his reader through the motions of starting a novel as a postcolonial author, not only with regards to how to come up with a good title, but also providing advice about how to get '10 000 euros pour cinq petits mots':

> Quand on avance un titre qu'on aime bien, il faut y aller prudemment. Généralement, l'éditeur veut vous entendre sur le contenu. De quoi s'agit-il? On pose encore de pareilles questions idiotes. Pas le genre de mon éditeur qui se détache un peu de sa table sans cesser de sourire. J'en profite pour regarder quelques titres autour de moi. Rien de bon. J'ai donc lancé négligemment le mien par-dessus le pile de manuscrits. Quoi? *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. Bref silence. Large sourire. Vendu![63]

The narrator's caustic comments about the business of selling a novel using the cultural currency of his 'exotic' identity might be seen to shed light comically on how Laferrière is also manipulating his celebrity narrative with *Je suis un écrivain japonais*. Laferrière's alter-ego insists that the title is not a joke but conceived as a response to categorising authors by their nationality: 'Quand, des années plus tard, je suis devenu moi-même écrivain et qu'on me fit la question : « Êtes-vous un écrivain haïtien, caribéen ou francophone? » je répondis que je prenais la nationalité de mon lecteur. Ce qui veut dire que quand un Japonais me lit, je deviens immédiatement un écrivain japonais'.[64] The overarching irony of Laferrière's text, then, is that despite its premise being the narrator-author's attempts to dispel the myth of

62 Poirier, *The Performing Self*, p. 41.
63 Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japonais* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 2008), p. 14.
64 Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japaonais*, p. 30.

authenticity and national literature, the provocative power of the title – including its comic value – is dependent upon his readership's prior knowledge of its author's nationality.

Laferrière continues to make fun out of the reactions aroused by 'postcolonial' issues and cultural buzzwords such as 'national identity'. Throughout the text, Laferrière's narrator asserts that his book does not exist. He goes so far as to try to avoid being categorised as a writer. With labyrinthine complexity, when asked about his profession he describes denying it in a book that he claims he has not started to write:

> – Vous êtes écrivain?
>
> – Pas en ce moment.
>
> Ils rient.
>
> – Vous êtes en train d'écrire un livre?
>
> – Oui et non.[65]

The narrator *is* of course writing the 'foutu bouquin' as he refers to it, although he admits that he has no acquaintances from Asia and later reveals that he dislikes sushi (indeed all fish), gleaning his knowledge about Japan mainly from (translated) haikus by Basho and women's magazines: 'Je parle sans jamais avoir été au Japon. Est-ce nécessaire? Me servant uniquement des clichés (mythes et photos) qu'on trouve dans les magazines féminins. Je garde une énorme pile près de la fenêtre'.[66] Overtly shunning any pretence of portraying an authentic picture of Japan he is nevertheless adamant that he is entitled to say he is a Japanese writer and he sets off to make a Japanese friend. He falls in love with a Japanese punk singer called Midori, whose friend gets killed outside his window and for whose murder Vieux becomes a suspect. Parallel to this storyline is the narrator's sudden fame in Japan. This prompts meetings with two Japanese ministers of culture who, upon hearing that he is planning to write a book called *Je suis un écrivain japonais* are concerned about the impact that this might have in Japan, particularly because the author is a black man.

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65 Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, p. 110.
66 Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, p. 243.

Overnight Laferrière's narrator becomes a celebrity in Japan because of the proposed titled of a novel he has yet to begin. As he puts it: 'C'est bien d'écrire un livre, mais c'est parfois mieux de ne pas l'écrire. Je suis célèbre au Japon pour un livre que je n'ai pas écrit'.[67] His talent for titles has triggered a movement of young writers and other professionals writing books in which they claim to be from countries that they were not born in:

> – C'est une vraie révolution là-bas. . . Votre livre est en train de devenir un phénomène de société.
>
> – Quel livre? Je n'ai pas écrit de livre.
>
> – Je parle du livre que vous êtes en train d'écrire.
>
> M. Tanizaki semble survolté. Il agite un mince bouquin sous mon nez. Je l'examine sans parvenir à déchiffrer un traître mot – c'est écrit en japonais. Il me le reprend des mains.
>
> – Le title de ce livre c'est *Je suis un écrivain malgache*, et c'est écrit par un Japonais.
>
> – Et alors?
>
> – C'est ainsi que les jeunes écrivains manifestent leur mépris envers le nationalisme littéraire. Pour eux un écrivain japonais n'écrit pas forcément un roman japonais. D'ailleurs ça n'existe plus un écrivain japonais.
>
> – C'est dommage car j'en suis un.[68]

The notable exception to this phenomenon of resistance is one hapless Japanese television broadcaster who, confused, writes a novel entitled *Je suis un animateur de télé japonais*. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard appears at this point in the text to deliver the paradoxical quip that 'cela sonne moins japonais quand c'est un Japonais qui dit qu'il est

67 Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, p. 258.
68 Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, p. 256.

japonais'.[69] The narrator's reputation establishes itself quickly and he is soon plagued by Japanese tourists lining up for autographs outside his bedroom.[70]

Through his parodies of the position of the 'postcolonial celebrity' Laferrière sheds light on the way his biography has been co-opted by the publishing industry and, to an extent, in certain strands of academic criticism. His trajectory from Port-au-Prince, to New York, to Montreal, to Miami, and back again to Montreal, is still routinely used to characterise him as a marginalised author who came to Canada 'comme immigrant et comme minoritaire'.[71] Indeed, terms such as 'migrant', 'minority' and 'exiled' seem to have become permanently attached to Laferrière's writing to such an extent that the issue even crops up in Mabanckou's novel *Black Bazar*. In the latter text, Mabanckou makes a joke out of the way Haitian authors are typically characterised when Fessologue wonders why it is that Haitians writers are:

> soit écrivains de génie soit chauffeurs de taxi à vie à New York ou à Miami. Et quand ils sont écrivains ils sont en exil. Est-ce qu'un écrivain doit toujours vivre dans un autre pays, et de préférence être contraint d'y vivre pour avoir des choses à écrire et permettre aux autres d'analyser l'influence de l'exil dans son écriture?[72]

In contrast to the narrator of *Je suis un écrivain*, Fessologue is desperate to be recognised as a writer. He faced a barrage of discouragement from his fellow drinkers down at Jip's after announcing his project. Roger Le Franco-Ivoirien, in particular, is reluctant to give Fessologue support in his endeavour, instead mocking the work-in-progress that he learns is entitled *Black Bazar*. Roger pounces on the wannabe-author as he enters, demanding if the writing project is a practical joke. 'C'est quoi cette arnaque que tu nous prépares?' he asks,

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69 Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, p. 256.
70 Laferrière, *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, p 202.
71 Lise Gauvin, *Écrire pour qui? L'écrivain francophone et ses publics* (Paris: Karthala, 2007), p. 130.
72 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 182.

before immediately following up this question with a volley of inquiries, none of which is less discouraging.[73]

Fessologue reacts to Roger's mockery by defending himself against the bombardment of admonishments. Roger's response – 'Je ne fais que t'aider, c'est tout ! Est-ce que tu comprends qu'écrire c'est pas blaguer, hein?' – sets the tone for the rest of the novel's self-parodic play with the image of authorial authority.[74] From this point onwards, the remainder of the narrative describes Fessologue's time in Paris as a writer as he tries to prove Roger wrong. The latter's warning haunts Fessologue and he confesses that every time he sits down to write he is reminded of the initial motivation behind his project: heartache. Not willing to admit this, he argues that because he started writing before the end of his relationship with Couleur d'origine 'Roger Le Franco-Ivoirien a donc tort de penser que j'ai commencé à griffonner ce journal à cause de mon ex et de L'Hybride'.[75] However, writing was little more than escapism for Fessologue in the early stages: he describes writing in the park as a way of avoiding domestic arguments. In these frenzied attempts to be a serious writer (complete with fake glasses) Fessologue hunches over his typewriter on a bench in the park surrounded by drunkards and homeless people. He writes so frantically that the group of down-and-outs start to look at him wearily, imagining that he would soon be amongst them: 'Je crois que je frappais trop fort sur les touches de la machine parce que même les clochards me regardaient d'un œil bizarre, l'air de dire que je pétais les plombs et que j'allais bientôt rejoindre leur assemblée. Moi j'écrivais, j'écrivais encore et encore'.[76]

When not furiously typing, Fessologue sits bird watching. He describes staring intently at the microcosm around him in an effort to practise his writing method:

> Lorsque je voyais un oiseau bouger sur une branche, je le notais. Quand il s'envolait pour changer d'arbre, je le notais aussi parce que Louis-Philippe qui en savait des choses sur

73 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 13.
74 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 17.
75 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 161.
76 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 167.

> l'inspiration m'avait prévenu que les écrivains notaient tout et ils faisaient par la suite l'inventaire de leurs notes pour ne garder que l'essentiel.[77]

Like Vieux, the limitations of Fessologue's world-view as an author are brought to the fore through his writing about writing, the documentation of which highlights the details of his immediate environment. Barely aware of other people, Fessologue's intentions seem purely personal despite his protests. Mabanckou thus provides a comic framing of the impossibility of grasping the myriad perspectives of a contemporary cosmopolitan city that the author has routinely been praised for producing. Fessologue's park bench is a useful point of reference to keep in mind, then, when his role as a writer is discussed in literary criticism, since *Black Bazar* has routinely been credited with reflecting the life of the African diaspora in Paris.

As I have just demonstrated, in some of their best-selling autofictional works both Mabanckou and Laferrière take comical swipes at their own authority as professional writers, and these playful jabs are not particularly difficult to discern. By comparison, Beyala's jests at her own expense as a postcolonial celebrity are much less obvious. In the next section of this chapter I will examine Beyala's parodic performances of identity alongside one of her fictional works that fails to function effectively as self-parody: *L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel,* and in this way will try to illustrate the different degrees to which these authors succeed in their self-reflexive strategies.

* * * * * *

Beyala Inc. Backfires?

A powerhouse of publicity and polemic since the late 1980s, Calixthe Beyala is renowned for her explicit and provocative style of writing as well as her similarly notorious extra-literary activities. From charges and convictions of plagiarism in the 1990s, to crashing the

77 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, pp. 167–8.

Césars ceremony alongside the Guadeloupian director Luc Saint-Éloy in 2000, to her more recently aired legal battle with Michel Drucker – a well-known television host who has been described as 'l'animateur préféré des Français' – two years after revelations about their sexual relationship were published in 2007 (I will come back to this later), Beyala has not failed to disappoint in terms of sheer entertainment value.[78] Over the course of the last thirty years, her name has proved to be a bankable commodity for her Parisian publishing house Albin Michel.

Beyala's media magnetism and its attendant extraordinary commercial success have been expertly documented and dissected by Nicki Hitchcott, whose chapter heading 'Calixthe Beyala Incorporated?' in *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration* (2006) neatly captures the author's outstanding editorial record and business-savvy attitude towards the press.[79] In an article that focuses on Beyala's political activities as founder and president of the organisation *Collectif égalité* (Collective for Equality), Hitchcott gives a detailed portrait of the author's treatment by the French media, highlighting the way that Beyala seems at once to cultivate certain images about herself that hark back to colonial clichés and simultaneously to fight against prejudice and racism in French society. Hitchcott notes twice how 'surprising' it is that Beyala, who has challenged the appropriateness of certain recurring roles given to black actors in television shows (drug dealer, pimp, prostitute, etc.), does not also challenge 'the ways in which she is constantly constructed as an exotic object of beauty' but rather, on the contrary 'often flirts with presenters, telling them that her given name, Calixthe, means "la plus jolie" in Greek'.[80]

Hitchcott's arguments about Beyala's somewhat puzzling attitude towards her representation in the French media are expanded upon in *Performances of Migration*. In her

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78 Henri Haget, 'Si j'attaque Michel Drucker, c'est une question d'honneur', *L'Express* (Paris, 15 May 2009) <http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/justice/calixthe-beyala-si-j-attaque-michel-drucker-c-est-une-question-d-honneur_760825.html> [accessed 10 April 2015].
79 This appears to be a reference to Graham Huggan's chapter on Margaret Atwood entitled 'Margaret Atwood Inc., or some thoughts on literary celebrity' in Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, pp. 209–227.
80 Nicki Hitchcott, 'Calixthe Beyala: Black Face(s) on French TV', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 12, 4 (2004), 473–482 (p. 476 and p. 477).

monograph, Hitchcott poses the question of the author's relationship to exoticism, asking whether through her actions Beyala is manipulating, subverting or conceding to clichés. She thus prompts us to consider whether Beyala is a type of postcolonial puppet or whether her 'protean performances of identity' work from within discourses of exoticism in order to undermine them. As part of her analysis, Hitchcott draws upon theories elucidated by Judith Butler, Mary Ann Doane and Graham Huggan to bring the concept of parodic performativity, the figure of the *femme fatale* and the idea of the 'postcolonial exotic' to bear on Beyala's literary career, also incorporating Homi Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' into her analysis in an effort to demonstrate further how Beyala's contradictory behaviour can be read as an indication of her ability to effectively perform different versions of herself. Using these methodological frameworks, Hitchcott looks at the fictional and non-fictional works produced by the author up until 2005 alongside the development of Beyala's public persona and her self-promotion as an 'icon of black femininity'.[81] Although I think there are at times problems with the way Hitchcott seems to reduce the ironic ambiguity of some of Beyala's novels to a simple reflection of the author's political stances as part of her effort 'to draw together Beyala's fictional politics of positioning with the "real life" positioning of Beyala herself by the ethnic majority in France',[82] ultimately Hitchcott's examination demonstrates convincingly that Beyala's behaviour in front of the camera can be construed as 'a complex game of resistance and (re)incorporation in which Beyala endeavours to stay one step ahead'.[83]

Insofar as Beyala parodies certain clichéd images of black femininity in public using performance to self-parodically manipulate her audience's exoticist expectations she might reasonably be labelled a type of 'colonial mimic', as Hitchcott suggests when she states that 'In Homi Bhabha's terms, Calixthe Beyala is a mimic'.[84] It is not clear, though, that Beyala's strategy is working. Beyala's reputation for 'inappropriate' behaviour on television and in

81 Nicki Hitchcott, *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 34.
82 Hitchcott, *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration*, p. 4.
83 Hitchcott, *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration*, p. 38.
84 Hitchcott, *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration*, p. 136.

radio interviews – by which I mean her outspoken aggressive stances on political issues, her occasionally belligerent conversational style, and the at times flirtatious flaunting of her physical appearance – are not obviously part of a strategy to dodge confinement within certain postcolonial identities.[85] Hitchcott for one does not seem entirely sure that Beyala's scheme of playing up to stereotypes is necessarily paying off. In her final summary of Beyala's fictional work *La Plantation* (2005), Hitchcott confirms the possibility that critical concerns about Beyala voiced by the likes of Mongo Beti could soon be validated.[86] Without mincing her words, Hitchcott states that:

> with the publication of *La Plantation* in 2005, Beyala appears to have begun to fulfil Beti's claim that she lacks the talent as a writer to fully realize her ambition. This novel confirms the fact that Beyala is now treading a very fine line between reappropriating exoticism and selling out to an exoticist readership.[87]

So, what could be seen as a deft parodic performance of a European audience's expectations of exoticism seems to be in very real danger of backfiring. Arguably, Beyala's reputation as a loudmouth who makes outlandish political claims has collided with, even obfuscated, any nuanced parodic performance of identity that she might be enacting in the media or in her novels.

In 2007, a year after Hitchcott's study of her works was published, Albin Michel published Beyala's media bombshell *L'Homme*. Described straightforwardly on the first edition's back cover as 'le récit d'une passion absolue' that narrates a love affair between a black woman and a white man, the blurb's basic profiling of the protagonist couches the story as fiction without indicating the author's inspiration from real-life events: 'Elle est

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85 For instance, Beyala publicly backed the late Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, and she has also been open about her friendship with, and defence of, the disgraced comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala, who was arrested for anti-Semitism and for being 'an apologist for terrorism' in 2015 after comments made about the shooting of employees at the Paris offices of the satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*.
86 Mongo Beti, 'L'Affaire Beyala ou Comment sortir du néocolonialisme en littérature', *Palabres*, 1 (1997), 39–48.
87 Hitchcott, *Performances of Migration*, p. 149.

noire, africaine, célibataire et mère d'une ado rebelle'.[88] The success of Beyala's well known 'celebrity narrative'[89] means that even in those few words at least some readers will recognise a partially sketched-out portrait of the author. This connection is encouraged by the fact that the front cover features a photograph of an unsmiling Beyala holding up a white sign upon which the title of the novel is printed. Below the title, the word 'roman' clearly stakes out the book's claim to fictionality (or to the freedoms that fiction offers) but the cover's format, with its close-up photograph of the author, conforms to the conventions of contemporary autobiography.

The text is essentially a *roman à clef* in which Beyala recounts her love affair with the French radio and television host Michel Drucker with whom she was entangled in a legal dispute in 2009 when she sued him for 200,000 euros. Beyala claimed that he had failed to pay her for ghostwriting a book of interviews with Régis Debray. She did not win her case, but instead was forced to pay Drucker the symbolic amount of one euro in damages.[90] In 2011, however, the Court of Appeals in Paris overturned the 2009 decision and awarded Beyala 40,000 euros in damages and legal costs, to be paid by Drucker. The reversal of the 2009 judgment was covered by the entire range of the popular French press from *People*, *Closer* and *Voici* to *Le Point* and *L'Express*. It represented an ironic and scandalous turning of the tables in which the condemned plagiarist resorted to legal procedures in order to vindicate the originality of one of her literary contributions.

In a video interview posted online shortly after her novel's publication, Beyala was asked outright if *L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel* is an autobiography or a novel. The author confirmed that it is the latter:

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88 Calixthe Beyala, *L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007). Back Cover.
89 This term connotes the idea of having an established biography and is drawn from scholarship on celebrity culture. Moudileno uses this idea in her discussion of Beyala, writing: 'As scholars of celebrity culture have shown, one of the elements that distinguishes people who are "known" from people who are "celebrities" is the presence of a narrative'. Moudileno, 'Fame, Celebrity and the Conditions of Visibility', p. 68.
90 In May 2009, Beyala's case against Drucker was dismissed in the *Tribunal de grande instance* (TGI) in Paris. See Emmanuel K. Akyeampong and Henry Louis Gates Jr, eds, *Dictionary of African Biography* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 440.

> C'est un roman parce que je veux dire, je suis romancière, j'ai pas fait un livre de circonstance. Il est tout-à-fait évident que pour la romancière que je suis les expériences personnelles interviennent d'une manière permanente dans tous mes livres, c'est pas seulement le premier, je veux dire que tous mes livres sont traversés par ce que j'ai vécu, par ce que j'ai vu, par mes rencontres, je veux dire que ça demeure avant tout un roman, mais un roman d'amour.[91]

In what Beyala insisted is 'avant tout un roman, mais un roman d'amour', one of the lovers gets a particularly rough handling. Drucker is fictionalised in *L'Homme*, though only just, as François Ackerman, Beyala providing only a thin veil to protect her characters' real identities. Drucker is easily recognisable through references to François's recently deceased brother, his dog, and his Sunday night show (Drucker presents 'Vivement Dimanche' that has a Sunday night slot on France 2) all of which minimise the reader's guesswork. Obsessed by his work, riddled with insecurities and anxieties, François is condemned in the final pages for his racist prejudice when he leaves Andela and returns to his wife, asking: 'Que vont dire la presse et la France profonde si on apprenait que j'ai quitté ma femme pour une femme noire ?'.[92] François's wife, who poisons his dog and stages credit card fraud in an effort to get him back, is also not cast in a kindly light.

The reader is encouraged to see the other main character, Andela, as a substitute for the author, since several of the narrator's biographical details map onto Beyala's own: like Beyala, Andela is an author living in the Parisian region called Pantin; she, like Beyala, has a teenage daughter; and she struggles for equal rights, as does Beyala.[93] It is also worth mentioning that Beyala's Twitter handle is *andelabeyala*, which could be seen to provide a

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91 My own transcription of a video interview with author entitled '"L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel" le dernier livre de Calixthe Beyala' (19 April 2007) <http://www.grioo.com/tv,l_homme_qui_m_offrait_le_ciel_le_dernier_livre_de_calixthe_beyala,8.html> [accessed 18 April 2015].
92 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 196.
93 '"L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel", le dernier livre de Calixthe Beyala' (19 April 2007) <http://www.grioo.com/info9978.html> [accessed 3 May 2015].

further indication of alignment between narrator, author, and protagonist that, as I mentioned, is seen as a marker of autofictional texts.

L'Homme may be autofictional, then, but it does not develop into literary self-parody in the same way as the texts examined earlier by Laferrière and Mabanckou.[94] One of the main reasons for this is that, even though Beyala plunders her personal life for inspiration, her narrator discusses her day job only briefly. Put another way, *L'Homme* is not a metafictional text. With the exception of a few sporadic paragraphs, the narrator deals primarily with her role as a famous writer who is in a relationship with another famous TV personality rather than with the act of writing *per se*. The narrator's profession only comes up on a few odd occasions, such as when she speaks bitterly about how much time she has spent in front of a computer screen to provide for her daughter, Lou. Andela recounts her slow progress and the struggle to concentrate since falling in love:

> Le bonheur se suffit à lui-même et cet état me mit dans l'incapacité d'écrire, de créer, d'imaginer, de concevoir ou d'inventer. Les pages de mon ordinateur demeuraient désespérément vides. Les feuilles vierges me narguaient et les phrases qui surgissaient de mes mains semblaient comme enfermées dans une armure. Je regardais fixement mon écran. On eût dit un trou, un trou terrifiant que je n'arrivais pas à combler tandis qu'à l'extérieur la vie continuait à faire son cinéma.[95]

There is nothing that is particularly amusing in this example of Beyala's engagement with the act of writing, and in this respect her work contrasts starkly with the texts examined in the first part of this chapter in which Mabanckou and Laferrière used the theme of novel-

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94 *L'Homme* is by no means Beyala's first novel to have been discussed in critical work on African autofiction. In several of Beyala's texts prior to 2007 the author's protagonists are female writers. The narrator of *La Petite Fille du réverbère* (1998) – Beyala B'Assanga Djuli – is given part of the author's own name and plays the part of hopeful young writer who grows up to reflect upon her successful career and whose anagrams of the literary magazine *Lire*'s editor Pierre Assouline (Monsieur Riene Poussalire) references the author's entanglement in accusations of plagiarism and what has come to be known as 'L'Affaire Beyala'.

95 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 137.

writing as a springboard for their comic self-reflection on the status of the celebrity postcolonial author.

Another reason that Beyala's text does not produce a sense of self-parodic humour is that her novel is conspicuously self-congratulatory. Beyala's narrator is arrogant and smug throughout the novel. Andela describes herself constantly as a defender of women's rights and a crusader for minorities who never stops worrying about other people. She portrays herself as a militant for the disadvantaged whose head is filled with images of beggars in Calcutta, children in the Sahel, and veiled women crying in front of dilapidated houses. The novel's opening lines suggest that Andela carries the weight of the world on her shoulders:

> Avant que François ne croise ma route, je m'échinais à épouser des combats pour ne jamais me perdre. Je défendais les droits des femmes; je combattais les parents indignes; je me battais pour les minorités visibles. Je me battais pour tant de choses que je n'ai pas vu passer ces quarante années de lumière solaire.[96]

Andela soon realises that she is starting to fall in love with François and she shares her concern with the reader that her feelings for him will distract her from focusing on the needy and disenfranchised. Eschewing her own happiness, she decides she would rather 'continuer à rêver comme rêvent ceux qui énoncent des phrases de paix ou de guerre, des phrases contre la pollution de l'air, contre les inégalités, ces phrases qui engagent ceux qui les prononcent mais ne les mettent pas à nu'.[97] In a further allusion to Beyala's reputation as a political activist and champion for minority rights, Andela states later on in the novel that her affair with François has distanced her from an association with 'cette trajectoire de pasionaria qui me collait à la peau', forcing her to admit that, despite her best efforts, 'Les dictateurs africains continuent à régner tristement accrochés à leurs lambeaux de privilèges'.[98]

96 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 11.
97 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 37.
98 Beyala, *L'Homme*, pp. 189–190.

Andela's sermonising is relentless. She doesn't miss an opportunity to remind the reader of her lofty ideals and worthy pursuits. For instance, Andela describes herself answering a phone call from François in the following melodramatic terms:

> Et moi, en Jeanne d'Arc dérisoire, moi qui ne sais que penser aux manifestations pour l'égalité des chances, aux attroupements pour la reconnaissance de l'esclavage comme crime contre l'humanité, aux pétitions contre les injustices, je livre mon ouïe à cet homme qui déjà dessine les clairs de lune où mes a priori et même mon intelligence seront mis en veilleuse.[99]

Andela's virtues extend beyond simply devoting herself to others: she is also highly intelligent. In conversations with François, Andela apparently hypnotises him with her vast knowledge of oppressed peoples and their histories:

> Je lui parlais des livres que j'avais lus, de l'histoire des esclaves dans les plantations, du drame de la colonisation, des minorités visibles, de l'égalité des chances. Il m'écoutait soucieux de capter toutes les vibrations de ma voix et s'émerveillait de mes connaissances.[100]

In addition to these lectures on colonial history and slavery, she also astounds him with her 'méthodologie de la connaissance' and her understanding of Marx and Hegel, Rousseau and Diderot.[101] Furthermore, she is supposedly extremely funny. During dinner one evening Andela replies sarcastically to François's observation that 'vous les Noirs, avez une peau exceptionnelle. On n'arrive pas à vous donner un âge' with the following rebuttal:

> C'est parce que les Blancs ne nous regardent que deux foix dans leur vie: la première fois quand on est domestique chez leurs parents et qu'on les lange ; la deuxième fois lorsqu'ils sont vieux et que des gardes-malades noirs viennent encore les torcher. Mais rassurez-vous, nous vieillissons comme tout le monde.

99 Beyala, *L'Homme*, pp. 41–42.
100 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 115.
101 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 109.

Although Andela's riposte is not exactly humorous, François looks up and says with sincerity: 'Je suis un vrai goujat et vous une merveille d'humour et de lucidité'.[102] In addition, she is indifferent to the temptation of material possessions, explaining to François that 'les luxueuses voitures m'indifféraient; que je me passais des télévisions à écran plasma; que je n'aimais pas manger chez Maxim's'.[103] And she is also, by her own admission, very attractive and an excellent lover. When she dresses up one evening in high-heeled shoes, she is so pleased with her transformation that she notes 'J'ai l'air d'une top-modèle vieillissante',[104] and she suggests that her talented performance in the bedroom that night enabled François to 'libérer son corps de son ordinaire'.[105] And as if all this wasn't enough, Andela is also so generous that François has to admonish her for giving away all of her money, reminding her that 'On n'est pas en Afrique ici'.[106]

On the face of it, then, Beyala's self-reflexive novel appears to be severely lacking in what Prendergast has called 'self-directed humour'. Many readers might consequently consider the way that Beyala amplifies her own charitable endeavours as the author's attempt to protect her own image in an inflammatory account of her affair with a married man. Perhaps, then, Beyala had no intention of producing a sense of self-parodic comedy in *L'Homme*. But even if this is the case, the outrageously self-satisfied image of herself that Beyala projects in the text is arguably still comical in a certain light: it could be seen to elicit a type of embarrassed, scoffing kind of laughter from the reader as a result of Beyala's seemingly sincere sky-high opinion of herself. Indeed, in the next chapter I'll look at some other ways in which Beyala's writing can be seen to generate a type of cringeworthy or embarrassed laughter.

Moreover, I would argue that Beyala's brazenly egotistical self-caricature in *L'Homme* could be read as a tongue-in-cheek self-mockery of her own image in the French

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102 Beyala, *L'Homme*, pp. 60–61.
103 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 164.
104 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 98.
105 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 101.
106 Beyala, *L'Homme*, p. 129.

press. So overblown and vainglorious are Beyala's claims about her good nature and self-sacrifice that it seems worth questioning the seriousness with which she hoped these descriptions of her fictionalised alter-ego to be understood. In other words, the saintly Andela was perhaps not intended as a straight-faced self-portrait. Rather, by over-emphasising her character's altruism, Beyala could have been trying to poke fun at the way that her postcolonial persona and her fiction are routinely associated with the idea of political activism and the promotion of minority rights.

Nevertheless, any nuanced parody that Beyala might have aimed to achieve with her narrator's exaggerated sense of moral duty was not picked up on by the majority of critics. At best, reviewers suggested that Beyala had written the book for publicity and didn't take it seriously. An article in *Le Figaro* began by asserting that the author 'vient de prendre une sérieuse option sur le titre de roman le plus racoleur de l'année'.[107] Another reviewer from the *Cameroun Tribune* asserted that the book 'se vendra grâce à la polémique' and then went on to explain that it didn't deserve to be reviewed by their publication:

> Personne ou presque ne s'est manifestement intéressé au contenu même du bouquin. Comme si l'on avait savamment choisi de nourrir et grossir la polémique pour grossir ce qu'on sait. Nous n'avions pas l'intention de nous en laisser compter et ce livre, nous l'avons lu pour vous. Hum.[108]

At worst, Beyala's text was condemned as nothing more than an act of cold-hearted revenge. In *Le Point*, Beyala was described as 'une femme délaissée qui saigne avec de l'encre amère.

107 Sebastien Le Fol, 'L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel', *Le Figaro Magazine* (Paris, 15 October 2007) <http://www.lefigaro.fr/lefigaromagazine/2007/04/27/01006-20070427ARTMAG90546-l_homme_qui_m_offrait_le_ciel.php> [accessed 15 March 2016].
108 Stéphane Tchakam, 'Cameroun: quand la femme se fâche', *Cameroun Tribune* (24 May 2007) <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/200705240809.html> [accessed 16 March 2016].

Elle offre le fiel à « L'homme qui lui offrait le ciel »',[109] and the reviewer at *L'Express* accused Beyala of writing her *roman-à-clef* with a crowbar.[110]

Two main points emerge from this comparison of Beyala's public image with her self-referential novel. First, Beyala's performances of identity both in front of the camera and in her fiction, however resilient and resourceful they may be in some senses, are troublesome in others. Beyala makes it difficult to discern when she is ironically adopting a clichéd image of herself. Essentially, any self-reflexive comedy in *L'Homme* is not clear enough for the reader to be sure that the author is attempting a paradoxical form of self-undermining, and for the most part the text appears rooted in its own inwardly turned self-interest, or what Augustine H. Asaah in a discussion of *La Petite Fille du réverbère* has called a type of 'self-reverence'. Asaah describes how:

> The aspiration to sacredness is equally discernible in the narcissistic nature of an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical work since the auto-referential work seeks to convince the Other that the self of the author is deserving of reverential contemplation by the subject and others. In this sense auto-reference becomes auto-reverence or invitation to reverence. Beyala's autofiction is no exception.[111]

A second point to draw from this comparison is the degree to which Beyala's public performances, political stances, and biographical context are privileged in the interpretation of her fictional texts. As we have seen in the examination of works by all three authors, there is a high risk of falling into an overreliance on the notion of the biographical author-figure when drawing conclusions about these writers' works, even in analysis of texts that are not obviously autofictional. The recourse to certain aspects of the author's biography as a way of

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109 Emmanuel Berretta, '« Un Animateur de télé » épinglé par un roman à clef', *Le Point* (Paris, 13 April 2007) <http://www.lepoint.fr/actualites-medias/2007-04-13/un-animateur-tele-epingle-dans-un-roman-a-clef/1253/0/178693> [accessed 16 March 2016].
110 Henri Haget, 'Si j'attaque Michel Drucker, c'est une question d'honneur', *L'Express* (Paris, 15 May 2009) <http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/justice/calixthe-beyala-si-j-attaque-michel-drucker-c-est-une-question-d-honneur_760825.html> [accessed 10 April 2015].
111 Augustine H. Asaah, 'Veneration and Desecration in Calixthe Beyala's "La petite fille du réverbère"', *Research in African Literature*, 36, 4 (2005), 155–171 (p. 161).

making sense of a novel has become a legitimised move in postcolonial criticism, as Nicholas Harrison has noted[112]and it is a critical maneuver that epitomises the type of politicised approach to literary texts that, as Cécile Bishop notes, 'preclude[s] the separation between the author and his or her work that is often advocated in other fields of literary criticism, more openly invested in aesthetic value'.[113]

* * * * * *

An examination of self-parody raises questions about the extent to which an author's background influences the interpretation of his or her work in certain strands of postcolonial criticism. I hope to have shown in my work here that even if an author is associated with a formerly colonised country or with the idea of 'migration' or 'diaspora', there seems little reason to assume that their fictional writing should accurately reflect this particular environment. As Nicholas Harrison has pointed out in his counter to David Damrosch's argument that world literature provides 'a window on different parts of the world',[114] for anyone whose aim is to learn about another country or culture, fiction is a problematic resource:

> The phrase 'windows on the world' raises methodological problems which one could [...] explore in terms of the suspension of reference, as well as in terms of the notion of a 'cultural point of origin' (6). The latter is problematic not least in the international world of literature itself: an Indonesian author's literary and other influences may be international.

112 Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 104.
113 Cécile Bishop, 'The Aesthetics of Tyranny African Dictatorships and the Work of Criticism' (doctoral thesis, King's College London, 2012), p. 54.
114 David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 24.

> And if you want to find out about Indonesia, why turn to works of literature, which are in part defined by, and make a virtue of, the unreliability they may conceal, or flaunt?[115]

The idea that postcolonial and world literature somehow provides a glimpse of a different reality by acting as a portal onto another world is not unreasonable, but it is potentially damaging for the creative freedom of 'postcolonial' or 'world' authors. This leads me to my next chapter's focus on 'awkward' humour, and the perhaps surprising way that a specifically embarrassing type of comedy can help to highlight and to complicate the way that postcolonial fiction is often expected to be 'truthful'.

115 Nicholas Harrison, 'World Literature: what gets lost in translation?', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49, 3 (2014), 411–426 (p. 425).

Chapter 4

Cringe Comedy and Colonial Clichés: Postcolonial 'Mockumentary' Fiction

J'aimerais bien savoir, être tout à fait sûr que le mythe du Nègre animal, primitif, barbare, qui ne pense qu'à baiser, être sûr que tout ça est vrai ou faux. Là. Direct. Définitivement. Une fois pour toutes.[1]

In a chapter entitled 'Documenting the Periphery: The French *Banlieues* in Words and Film' from his recent work *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism* (2013) Dominic Thomas describes an emerging category of fiction as '*banlieue* writing' and argues that it provides a window onto the social injustice and inequality of contemporary France.[2] According to Thomas, *banlieue* writing 'effectively records the realities of a part of French society that had previously been either ignored or reductively *represented* by outsiders'.[3] For Thomas, the work of *banlieue* authors such as Faïza Guène 'offers a privileged perspective on the "invisibles" in French society' and can 'articulate a sociological reality that remains otherwise defined only by reductive external projections and representations that circulate in print media and on television'.[4] An analysis of Guène's writing is beyond the scope of this examination, but Thomas's remarks about her work are a useful starting point here insofar as they attest to the tendency to consider postcolonial authors particularly well placed to respond to racial stereotypes. His analysis also implies

1 Dany Laferrière, *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher/Le Serpent à Plumes, 1999 [1985]), p. 49.
2 Part of this chapter appeared first as an article entitled 'Documenting the Periphery: The Short Films of Faïza Guène', *French Forum*, 35, 2–3 (2010), 191–208.
3 Dominic Thomas, *Africa and France: Postcolonial Cultures, Migration, and Racism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 193.
4 Thomas, *Africa and France*, pp. 194–195.

that postcolonial fiction can be read as tantamount to documentary narrative. In this chapter, I argue that Beyala, Mabanckou and Laferrière parody documentary devices as a way of responding to this critical approach to postcolonial fiction. By pairing Mabanckou's *Black Bazar* (2009) with Laferrière's *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* (1993), and contrasting these works in turn with Beyala's *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine* (2000) and Laferrière's *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985), I hope to show how ironic claims to truth in these texts call into question the putative responsibility – and ability – of postcolonial authors to undermine clichés and provide transparent accounts of postcolonial cultures.

Mock-documentary gained momentum with the postmodern suspicion of claims to truth, which had significant repercussions for the reception of documentary texts. As Barbara Foley and Linda Hutcheon have demonstrated in their respective works on 'documentary fiction' and 'historiographic metafiction', truth-telling narrative techniques were appropriated by postmodern authors such as Ishmael Reed and E. L. Doctorow to target the supposed impartiality of documentary and historiographic representation.[5] Scepticism towards accepted versions of history and claims to truth also prompted parodic play with documentary forms in the context of cinema. 'Mock-documentary' or 'mockumentary' films as they are known in the field of media studies are understood to be part of the general challenge to documentary authority inspired by postmodernist critique.[6]

Unlike parodic play with documentary techniques in literature, mockumentary films garnered attention because they characteristically produce a distinct type of comic tension.[7] This brand of humour is referred to as 'cringe comedy' or 'awkward humour' due to the way it generates a sense of self-exposure and embarrassment for the viewer. I want to suggest that a comparable type of uncomfortable comic effect is also produced by the faux-documentary

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5 For instance, in texts such as *Mumbo-Jumbo* and *The Book of Daniel*. See Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, pp. 105–140; and Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 234–268.
6 Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, *Faking it: Mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 28–29.
7 I say characteristically, but there are mockumentary films that are not intended for comic purposes, for example *The Blair Witch Project*.

novels by Beyala, Mabanckou and Laferrière. To this end, I will draw upon two of the main ideas that have been developed in film theory about the way mock-documentaries generate cringe comedy. I hope to highlight the complex intermingling of self-consciousness and confusion that playing with claims to truth can provoke in a reader, especially when these claims are being made about taboo topics such as racial stereotypes. As part of my argument here, then, I hope to show how the dominant postcolonial critical approach to parodies of stereotypes in fiction oversimplifies a reader's reaction to this type of humour in order to uphold a subversive reading of a text.

I should make clear from the outset with regards to my methodological framework in this chapter that there are of course limits to the extent to which it is possible to compare techniques across film and fiction. I do not want to exaggerate the similarity between cultural products as disparate as mockumentary film and postcolonial literature. Some of the documentary devices used in mockumentary films are medium-specific. Lighting and sound, for instance, do not cross over easily into literary analysis. Nevertheless, there are some documentary devices that do have counter-parts in both filmic and literary contexts, and these are the ones that I will focus on in my analysis.

This chapter is split into two sections, each of which is centred on a different mock-documentary mechanism. I start by examining two texts that generate embarrassing humour as a result of their incongruous claims to truth: Mabanckou's *Black Bazar* and Laferrière's *Cette grenade*. I argue that these authors highlight expectations about postcolonial fiction as a representative and truth-bearing mode of writing by ironically manipulating documentary narrative tools, three of which appear in both texts: the recourse to eyewitnesses, the use of expert opinions, and the presentation of impartial analysis. The main idea here is to show how Mabanckou and Laferrière use parodic incongruity to illuminate the way that postcolonial fictions are expected to subvert clichés and provide the reader with a truthful rendition of reality.

Next, I explore the mockumentary device of 'sustained plausibility' in order to suggest that this parodic technique is taken up in the How To Guide-book novels as a way of

calling into question the possibility of destabilising stereotypes through ironic repetition. By drawing comparisons between moments of awkward humour in Beyala's *Comment cuisiner* and Laferrière's *Comment faire* I try to show how these authors deliberately display parody's failure and its attendant embarrassing after effect. In this way, I argue that they can be seen to highlight parody's pitfalls as a mode of critique and to promote a postmodern understanding of parodic contestation as inherently complicit.

An examination of texts that appear to confirm racial prejudice introduces into my work here a crucial aspect of humour in postcolonial contexts that I have not yet touched upon explicitly in my previous analysis, namely the ethical quandary of laughing at jokes steeped in racist ideology. The moral dimension of this style of humour – which is to say its provocative engagement with racist clichés – plays a significant part in creating an uncomfortable reading experience.

The Documentary 'Discoveries' of Eye-Witness Explorers

The consensus on the subject of humour in fake-documentary cinema is that cringeworthy comedy can be created in two ways. The first one I want to focus on here – parodic incongruity – is the most straightforward and basically designates filmmakers thwarting expectations of documentary authority. As Bill Nichols explains, we harbour certain expectations when we watch a documentary film because we recognise particular aspects of the cinematic text that encourage us to think that what we are watching is the 'truth'. Nichols calls this the 'documentary mode of engagement'.[8] Parodic play upon documentary conventions in mockumentary films such as the cult classic *This is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984) highlight the type of assumptions involved with this interpreting strategy.

In *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (2005) Paul Ward puts forward the idea of 'sustained plausibility' to distinguish between parody documentaries that mimic the form of

8 Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991) p. 25.

a documentary but which have an illogical, absurd content and those in which the 'marker of parody' is absent or difficult to discern. I will return to the concept of sustained plausibility later in this chapter, but for now I want to pick up on the idea of the 'marker of parody' which, according to Ward, constitutes a 'sudden incursion of something that ruptures the verisimilitude and creates incongruity'.[9] In Ward's eyes, the awkward humour of mock-documentary arises in many instances because of a juxtaposition between a form that suggests plausibility and a subject matter that is far from believable.

The link between incongruity and cringe comedy is central to another recent in-depth analysis of mockumentary humour by Jason Middleton entitled *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship* (2014). Middleton connects cringe comedy to a model of incongruity outlined in Jerry Palmer's *Taking Humour Seriously* (1993). In the latter text, Palmer argues that a 'plausibility versus implausibility' model is key to the structure of all comic narratives and typified by the 'logic of sight gags' featuring Laurel and Hardy. Middleton takes Palmer's notion of fluctuating plausibility and places it in the context of traditional incongruity theories of laughter by Henri Bergson and Thomas Hobbes in order to argue that this conceptualisation of humour can be applied usefully to the analysis of mock-documentary films.

The logic behind Middleton's theory here is that mockumentary film pushes its viewers in opposing directions with regard to its reliability, and it is the hesitation and confusion that results from this contradiction that creates a distinctly awkward comic effect. On the one hand, then, the format of the film prompts an engagement with the text of the type Nichols describes. On the other hand, the film presents fictional and patently absurd subjects. As Middleton puts it:

> Awkward moments occur when an established mode of representation or reception is unexpectedly challenged, stalled, or altered: when an interviewee suddenly confronts the interviewer, when a subject who had been comfortable on camera begins to feel trapped in

9 Paul Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 70.

> the frame, when a film perceived as a documentary turns out to be a parodic mockumentary.[10]

I want to suggest that the disjuncture of parodic incongruity can function in literature in a similar way to produce a disconcerting sense of unease. Set in France and America respectively, Mabanckou's *Black Bazar* and Laferrière's *Cette grenade* both have at their core a faux-formal examination of Western culture. The dynamic of ironic documentary 'discovery' discernible in these works therefore provides a good testing ground to explore the literary version of this mockumentary technique.

The narrators of *Black Bazar* and *Cette grenade*, Vieux and Fessologue, both reproduce the powerful truth-telling technique of the 'testimonial' with hyperbolic flair. It is worth quickly pointing out that the Vieux I refer to in this section of the chapter is different to the Vieux I will discuss as the narrator of *Comment faire* in the next section. The best way of pinpointing how they differ is that the 'Comment-faire-Vieux' is the author of *Paradis du Dragueur Nègre*, whereas the 'Cette-grenade-Vieux' is the author of *Comment faire*. As we saw in the previous chapter on self-parody, both of the Vieux characters, as well as Fessologue, share traits with Laferrière and Mabanckou: a conflation that tempts readers and critics alike to view the narrators as providing a first-hand account of the authors' personal experiences. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that these works are fictional novels, however much the narrators may teasingly try and persuade the reader otherwise.

One of the ways that Fessologue and Vieux try to convince the reader of their trustworthiness as eye-witnesses is by 'mapping' their environments. Both narrators constantly cite cities and other locations to bolster the impression that they have recorded an event accurately 'on site'. In this way they can be said to 'map' their surroundings. Desperate to be taken seriously, Fessologue and Vieux do this to such a degree that their

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10 Jason Middleton, *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 3–4.

attempts to promote an impression of their text's immediacy and indexicality become comically overstated, an exaggerated appeal to the reader to buy into the idea of their 'representativity'.[11]

Vieux goes to the greatest lengths to persuade his reader that he has seen America with his own eyes by playing up the referentiality of his writing through 'mapping'. He composes *Cette grenade* as a report and from the outset insists that he has an obligation to write factually in his capacity as a journalist, explaining that he has been commissioned to produce an article on race relations in America for a respected publication: 'On m'a commandé un long reportage pour un prestigieux magazine de la côte est'.[12] Prior to this admission, Vieux has also assured the reader that the book he or she holds in their hand is absolutely *not* a novel: 'Ceci n'est pas un roman. Je le dis en pensant à Magritte dessinant une pipe et écrivant en légende: « Ceci n'est pas une pipe »'.[13]

Vieux's reference to surrealist painter Henri Magritte, who famously questioned the relationship between the representation of objects and their reference to the real world in a series of object paintings, qualifies the meaning of his denial of the text's status as a novel. It produces a type of ironic doubling back on his initial assertion about his writing being nonfiction that functions like a hopscotch on the border between fact and fantasy. In a sense, Vieux's sentence here prompts an interpretative fluctuation that mirrors the experience of viewing Magritte's paintings. The unsettling quality of Magritte's works has been noted by art historians and was also mentioned by Michel Foucault in his analysis of Magritte's pipe painting *La Trahison des images [Ceci n'est pas une pipe]* (1929), when he compared the painting to a calligram. Foucault described the 'gêne indéfinie' provoked by looking at the painting as we flick back and forth between word and image.[14]

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11 This term is from Nicholas Harrison, *Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory, and the Work of Fiction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), pp. 192–111.
12 Dany Laferrière, *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit ?* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher/Le Serpent à Plumes, 2009 [1993]), p. 14.
13 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 13.
14 See Elizabeth B. Silva, 'Unsettling objects: Introduction' in *Objects and Materials: Routledge Companion*, ed. by Penny Harvey et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 183–186 (p.183). Also see

Foucault's comparison of the painting to a calligraphic poem is pertinent here because of the way that it highlights the parallel between the two models of mockumentary comedy – parodic incongruity and sustained plausibility – and two theories about how we interpret irony. What I mean by this is that the traditional approach to ironic expression emphasises the idea of an oscillation between two opposing meanings of the kind that occurs when we read ironic statements or view an ambiguous geometric configuration (such as the Necker cube).[15] In other words, the vacillation between hermeneutic options produces a 'vague uneasiness' similar to that which occurs from the vacillation between plausibility and implausibility provoked by these two mock-documentary texts. I will discuss the second theory of irony later in this chapter, using a concept put forward by Linda Hutcheon as a way of illustrating the connection between ironic expression and the mock-documentary theory of sustained plausibility, but first I would like to focus on Laferrière's launch into parodic incongruity, which has caused some confusion for critics who circle around the author's play with labels of fact and fiction. Stéphan Gibeault, for instance, describes the narrator of *Cette grenade* as 'un reporter fictif racontant des faits, en partie réels en partie fictifs, créant un récit pris comme réel dans ce qu'il prétend être un roman (donc fictif)'.[16] Vieux's entreaties to the reader to read his writing as nonfiction within a work that he nevertheless flags up as fiction can be seen as part of Laferrière's parody of truth-telling modes of narration. Setting up this tension from the start will, as we shall see, be integral to the text's capacity to create cringeworthy humour with clichés.

As his journey across the country progresses, Laferrière details Vieux's movements with a geographic precision that lends a confusing sense of credibility to the narrator's claims to truth. Vieux incorporates a constant stream of place-names into his tales of life in the United States following his disclaimer that 'J'écris ce livre avec des notes prises sur le

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Michel Foucault, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe: deux lettres et quatre dessins de René Magritte* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1973), p. 19.

15 See Robert Wicks's essay on Foucault in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* in which he talks about Foucault's theories on the oscillation between word and image as part of the experience of perceiving a calligram. Robert Wicks, 'Foucault', in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. by Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes, 3rd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) 159–169.

16 Stéphan Gibeault, '« Du faux "je" au vrai "jeu" » ', *Spirale*, 194 (2004), 24–25 (p. 25).

vif, un peu partout en Amérique du Nord'.[17] The text becomes so steeped in references to cities that it starts to resemble a live newsfeed. He lists the locations of his various reports, claiming to have written: 'Dans un train en direction de Vancouver […] Dans un autobus filant vers le sud (Key West) […] Dans ce restaurant végétarien de San Francisco […] Dans un taxi, à la sortie d'une discothèque de Manhattan […] Dans les toilettes du Shade (un bar branché de Montréal, sur le boulevard Saint-Laurent, fréquenté par de jeunes comédiennes aux seins métalliques qui vous lancent des clins d'œil au laser)'.[18]

Laferrière also frames Vieux's narrative in a diligent bullet-point style of note-taking to give a sense of factuality to his protagonist's movements, especially in the chapter entitled 'QUELQUES RÈGLES POUR SURVIVRE EN AMÉRIQUE', which is presented as a page from a travel log:

> **Carnet de route**
>
> Je note dans mon calepin:
>
> 1. DANS LE MÉTRO DE NEW YORK

This system of note-taking is repeated nine more times in different cities and states:

> 2. CHICAGO: RUE PRINCIPALE
> 3. DALLAS: UN RESTAURANT
> 4. BROOKLYN: L'AVENIR MIS EN BOÎTE
> 5. LOS ANGELES: UN PARTY À BEVERLY HILLS
> 6. BOSTON: UN NOUVEAU RÉGIME
> 7. CONNECTICUT: LA REINE DU FOYER
> 8. AÉROPORT DE SAN FRANCISCO
> 9. MIAMI: L'ARGENT DE LA DROGUE
> 10. BELLE GLADE: BIG SUGAR[19]

17 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 13.
18 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, pp. 13–14.
19 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, pp. 283–320.

The 'carnet de route' which appears to record where and when conversations and anecdotes took place is not necessarily humorous in itself, but it does demonstrate the extent to which Laferrière makes use of documentary formatting and style to make Vieux appear to be an eye-witness on American culture. With exaggerated pedantry, Vieux pretends to be 'reporting' on the incidents that appear in the novel.

For instance, he does this in another section of the novel in which he purports to offer a true account of different reactions to the title of his first book. The chapter contains twenty short skits, a small sample of which I cite below to underscore the comic vein of the puzzlement, confusion, offense and embarrassment (sometimes Vieux's own) that the title *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* ostensibly provoked:

> 2. À Madrid (Espagne), une jeune féministe me lance:
>
> – J'ai changé un mot dans ton titre, veux-tu savoir ce que ça donne?
>
> – Bien sûr.
>
> – Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans LE fatiguer.[20]

> 4. À New York (États-Unis), à la première du film tiré du roman, une jeune fille (encore!) s'est approchée de moi:
>
> – Est-ce vous, l'auteur du roman?
>
> – Oui.
>
> – N'avez-vous pas honte d'avoir choisi un tel titre?
>
> – Non.
>
> Elle m'a lancé brusquement son verre de vin au visage.[21]

> 6. À Paris (France), une jeune femme, genre rigolote, me confie devant un verre de vin au Café de Flore:
>
> – Tu sais, j'ai acheté ton livre, pas pour le lire. Je l'ai placé sur ma table de chevet, ça éloigne les prétentieux.[22]

20 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 29.
21 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 30.

12. À Port-au-Prince (Haïti), un ami exigeant m'a glissé:

– Il n'y a que le titre d'intéressant dans ton livre.[23]

14. À Anvers (Belgique), la traductrice a amélioré le titre, qui est devenu en néerlandais: *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans devenir noir*.[24]

In addition to being amusing, these skits are also good examples of Vieux's habit of tagging locations in his narrative in order to build up the impression that he is providing a verifiable account of reality. Vieux's numerical organisation of his material and his carefully repeated formatting works to reinforce the impression that he has noted these incidents down 'sur le vif' rather than fabricating them post-event.

The similarity between Laferrière's trademark fragmentary textual composition and the style of standard journalistic copy has been noted by other critics, too, particularly in relation to his first work, *Comment faire*. Piotr Sadkowski has described the latter text in terms of its stylistic affinity with journalistic writing, using a news-reporter analogy to explain how the text is reminiscent of 'la technique de reportage direct' and to suggest that this gives 'l'impression de la simultanéité de l'histoire et de la narration'.[25] Arguably the use of journalistic techniques is even more prominent in Laferrière's later work: *Cette grenade* offers an abundance of examples of where Laferrière excels at producing a playful sense of documentary credibility through mapping.

Laferrière's mocked up reporting can be seen to anticipate critical responses to the text as representative of the reality of black men in North America. One reviewer described

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22 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 31.
23 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 34.
24 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 34. Alison Rice also mentions the title of the Dutch translation in '« Seuls les mots sont en Français »: Dany Laferrière's « Transnational » Writing in French', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 86 (2009), 37–43 (p. 38).
25 Piotr Sadkowski, 'L'Écrivain « Transaméricain » se met en scène québécoise ou *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* de Dany Laferrière', in *Parcours québécois: introduction à la littérature du Québec*, ed. by Pierre Morel (Bucharest: Editura Cartier, 2007), 156–166 (p. 165).

the work as providing 'une fresque vivante et colorée des États-Unis d'aujourd'hui'[26] and another likened the text to an 'x-ray of American society'.[27] These descriptions of Laferrière's portrait of America echo the gloss of *Black Bazar* that appeared in the *Guardian* in 2012, which characterised Mabanckou's work as a 'vivid picture of the life of African émigrés in Paris'.[28] In *Black Bazar*, Fessologue, the wide-eyed witness of Parisian culture, maps his landscape in detail in his journal – an implicitly confessional style of writing – using familiar sites and verifiable locations such as the bar Jip's and bookshop Le Rideau Rouge to foreground his narrative's connection to reality.

As we saw at then end of the previous chapter, Fessologue describes his favourite place to write as a park bench. I argued in Chapter 3 that because Fessologue observes his immediate surroundings (birds, hobos, etc.) with exaggerated concentration, in a sense Mabanckou is underscoring the limitations of his own view of Parisian culture as part of the self-parodic fun he has undermining his authority as a famous postcolonial writer. Building on this idea, then, I want to suggest here that Mabanckou's parody of documentary codes also works to destabilise his 'representative' viewpoint on the Parisian diaspora. If autofictional and mock-documentary writing styles overlap insofar as they both manage to cast doubt on the narrator's 'representative' view-point, then, it is worth pointing out that Fessologue's faux transformation from a man who eyes-up female buttocks to an eye-witness on Parisian life produces a distinctly cringeworthy comic effect.

Fessologue's documentation of the world around him has been read as a realistic recording of immigrant life by certain postcolonial critics. John Walsh, for instance, buys into the transparency of Fessologue's narrative. In his reading of *Black Bazar* in 'Mapping

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26 Vanessa Postec, 'Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?', *L'Express* (Paris, 1 September 2009) <http://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/cette-grenade-dans-la-main-du-jeune-negre-est-elle-une-arme-ou-un-fruit_792908.html#k88oOZLgpDtvJl4q.99> [accessed 2 September 2015].
27 Taina Tervonen, 'Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit ?' *Africulture* (Les Pilles, France, 1 November 2002), <http://www.africultures.com/php/?nav=article&no=2637 > [accessed 2 September 2015].
28 Jane Housham, 'Black Bazar by Alain Mabanckou translated by Sarah Ardizzone – review', *Guardian* (London, 17 July 2012) <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jul/17/black-bazaar-alain-mabanckou-review> [accessed 2 September 2015].

Afropea: The Translation of Black Paris in the Fiction of Alain Mabanckou' Walsh praises Fessologue as the 'budding anthropologist'[29] who diligently records the Parisian world around him. Walsh asserts that '*Black Bazar* represents Mabanckou's most sustained effort to reflect on the "bazaar" that is Paris'[30] and goes on to suggest that Fessologue successfully captures different aspects of life in the French capital when he asserts that 'From prologue to epilogue, Fessologue is at work on a text that documents the everyday marketplace of Paris; in the familiar conceit of the "book within the book" Mabanckou fictionalizes the writer of a *littérature-monde*'.[31] Walsh also insists on Fessologue's documentary narrative style when he describes the text as a 'simple recording' and argues that Fessologue acts as an impartial observer of the African-Parisian diaspora whose 'comedic voice gives way to the more serious air of a documentary on immigrant life in Paris'.[32]

Contrary to Walsh, I'd argue that Fessologue's comic voice is a constant presence in the text, and perhaps most especially when it takes on documentary overtones. What Walsh's analysis misses is the fact that Mabanckou's text is ironically using documentary conventions to mock the idea that his work is somehow capable of representing the diverse nature of the Afro-Parisian diaspora. In other words, Walsh skips over the fun that Mabanckou has with this jest at documentary's generic conventions. Certainly, Fessologue's account includes observations about neighbours and friends, rivals and lovers. But these eclectic figures have sobriquets that self-consciously emphasise the *supposedly* representative nature of the novel, such as: Paul du Grand Congo, Roger Le Franco-Ivoirien, Yves L'Ivoirien, Pierrot Le Blanc, Couleur d'origine, L'Hybride etc. Fessologue's recounting of his conversations with these people is part of the comic set-up of a text appearing to offer unfettered access to the world of black communities in the French capital

29 John Walsh, 'Mapping Afropea: The Translation of Black Paris in the Fiction of Alain Mabanckou', in *Francophone Afropean Literatures*, ed. by Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 95–109 (p. 107).
30 Walsh, p. 103.
31 Walsh, p. 107.
32 Walsh, pp. 106–107.

but which is in fact working to foreground the danger of reading 'fact' in the place of (postcolonial) fiction.

The fundamental tension that I have highlighted so far is between the fictional status of these texts and the implicit and explicit claims being made within them about their factuality. However helpful 'mapping' may be in the promotion of the protagonists as eye-witness reporters on the scene in Paris and America, these texts become increasingly difficult to take seriously as documentary representations of life in the West when we consider the farcical way in which the narrators embody the role of 'expert' on the places they claim to have seen.

Veritable virtuosos

As part of the mockumentary fun of these texts, the protagonists appear to embody – tongue-in-cheek – the figure of the 'expert' that is widely considered a codified tool of documentary filmmaking. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight's work on documentary can help us here, since they clarify how in the filmic context the recourse to 'experts' is categorised alongside other techniques such as the use of photographic stills and archival footage to form 'part of the code of realism and naturalism, allowing documentary to continue to position itself as a mere recorder of the real, rather than actively constructing ideological accounts of the social world'.[33] In the case of these mockumentary novels, then, the figure of authority and expertise that is usually used to prompt viewers of documentary to accept the conclusions offered in the film is parodied in the form of the first-person narrators Vieux and Fessologue.

It is the forthright Fessologue who plays up to his role of cultural informant with notable gusto, mimicking the talk-show guests that he watches on television each evening with evident enthusiasm.[34] Fessologue fits well into the spoof-expert mould, not least because his name is itself a fairly flagrant mockery of the status of the expert. His unique and

33 Roscoe and Hight, pp. 16–17.
34 Alain Mabanckou, *Black Bazar* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), p. 24.

well-honed set of interpretive skills has earned him a reputation at Jip's and the pseudonym 'Dr Butt' or 'Buttologist'. In contrast to his capacity for concentration on female behinds, Fessologue has a limited knowledge of France and French customs. His expertise on French history, for instance, is comically confused. He takes liberties with accepted versions of the geographical confines of France by consistently appending Monaco onto any mention of French territory, such as in the first line of the novel: 'Quatre mois se sont écoulés depuis que ma compagne s'est enfuie avec notre fille et L'Hybride, un type qui joue du tam-tam dans un groupe que personne ne connaît en France, y compris à Monaco et en Corse'.[35] The fun of the 'y compris' in Fessologue's opinion is lost on critics who fail to pick up on the author's joke. Without a sense of the comic vein in which Fessologue makes this type of comment, critics like Walsh have been left puzzled as to why Fessologue mentions Monaco and Corsica at all. Searching for the geo-political significance of this recurrent tag, Walsh writes in relation to the opening line of *Black Bazar* that:

> As Pascale de Souza has pointed out, in this new "literary geography" the political borders of Mabanckou's cartography are oddly drawn, especially since Monaco is not part of France and Corsica has always had a "thriving independence movement" (2011: 106). Fessologue seems to have no use for geographical and political boundaries; at the very least, one wonders why Monaco and Corsica would have a hold on his imagination. In any event, Mabanckou marks Fessologue and his fellow characters with nominal designations as part of a satirical world-view that plays with national and racial identification.[36]

The spoof quality of Fessologue's expertise comes across again in his imaginative interpretations of French history. A good example of this occurs when a man enters Jip's and asks him for an account of the current political situation in Congo. Fessologue plays up to the role of *savant* with exuberance, eventually chasing away the visitor as a result of his

35 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 9.
36 Walsh, p. 104. See also Pascale de Souza, 'Trickster Strategies in Alain Mabanckou's *Black Bazar*', *Research in African Literatures*, 42, 1 (2011), 102–119.

over-bearing lecturing style, admitting that 'Je crois que le type se souviendra de moi toute sa vie. Je n'ai jamais bavardé aussi longtemps dans un bar face à un inconnu'.[37]

Fessologue dives into the discussion by describing the Berlin Conference of 1884–5 that instigated the period of heightened colonial activity by the European powers known as 'the scramble for Africa'. For Fessologue, this was just a way for the Western politicians to 'calmer leurs humeurs belliqueuses'.[38] He launches into a bitter tirade describing the state of Congolese post-independence politics, asserting the abject failure of the French revolutionary ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity.[39] His tone becomes more hyperbolic and hysterical as his train of thought gets increasingly metaphorical and derisive. He describes a type of 'revised and corrected' revolution that could be executed in Brazzaville and supported by an imaginary 'Revolution Service' that France might provide to its former colony. Manipulating the cliché of African incompetence, Fessologue suggests that this service would be equipped with around the clock helplines in case of 'revolution breakdowns' during the night and instructions for the Congolese to fix the 'broken light bulbs' of the 'Revolution Machine' that have been fused by the power of Western Enlightenment thinkers, or as they are otherwise known, the 'Lumières':

> On aurait pu, avec un peu plus de courage politique, nous acheter une version revue et corrigée de la Révolution française, et la France elle-même nous l'aurait volontiers livrée clés en main, avec un service fiable de maintenance 24h/24, 7j/7 et un numéro vert au cas où il y aurait eu des pannes de révolution la nuit et que personne dans le pays n'aurait été capable de changer les boulons et de remplacer les ampoules grillées à cause du voltage surélevé des Lumières! D'accord, on aurait alors eu notre 1789 à nous. Et après, hein?[40]

In his edited and imaginary version of historical events, Fessologue's references to landmark dates and imperial power-players such as Napoléon Bonaparte ('Il nous aurait fallu trouver

37 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 234.
38 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 234
39 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 237.
40 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 237.

par exemple un Napoléon Bonaparte local. . .') create a hilariously surreal 'expert' interpretation of colonial history.[41]

Fessologue also provides an unabridged version of events in Congo since the colonial encounter when he mocks the images that his girlfriend Couleur d'origine retains of Africa from French history books. Couleur d'origine has African heritage but has grown up in Europe and knows nothing of the continent besides what she has been taught in French schools. Fessologue becomes aware of his girlfriend's naivety vis-à-vis images of Africa and is perturbed when she remains obstinate that her sources are accurate. He becomes outraged by his girlfriend's effort to cling onto colonial-era clichés of Africa even when he insists upon his insider's expertise on the continent: 'mon ex n'était pas convaincue de mes explications', he complains, 'Elle argumentait, elle contredisait, elle citait ces bouquins d'histoire que les Blancs avaient écrits entre deux expéditions coloniales et des batailles perdues contre Chaka Zulu qui s'amusait à les piéger à l'aide de la tactique de la terre brûlée'.[42] He continues on to list some of the clichés of Africa disseminated by historical textbooks and regurgitated by Couleur d'origine, describing how 'Elle me parlait des cases en terre battue, des cabanes dans les arbres, de la magie noire des Africains, de la sorcellerie qui rendait l'être humain invisible, des marécages qui avalaient les arbres, des animaux en liberté, de la terre rouge qui encrassait le visage des enfants au ventre ballonné'.[43] What Mabanckou brings to light in these scenes is his narrator's sense that he has responsibility to overturn stereotyped images of Africa and present the reader (and Couleur d'origine!) with an up-to-date vision of reality.

Vieux similarly tries to persuade his reader that his conclusions about America should be read as social observation of a professional standard. He includes in his anecdotal account of American life commentary from the standpoint of someone with a wide range of experience dealing with interracial problems in the United States. The text is replete with pithy statements that aim to put across to the reader this image of himself as an expert. For

41 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 237.
42 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 53.
43 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, pp. 53–54.

instance, Vieux fills an entire section of his work with question-and-answer portions that ostensibly give the reader advice on how to become successful in America: 'Comment un écrivain nègre peut-il retrouver son chemin dans cette jungle?'[44] he begins, before following up with variations on this theme, such as: 'Comment un honnête écrivain nègre peut-il travailler dans de telles conditions?';[45] 'Comment reconnaître les signes de la célébrité?';[46] 'Comment revivre le bon vieux temps sans nostalgie?';[47] 'Comment tout cela a-t-il commencé?'[48] The question then becomes a statement in its final appearance as 'Comment avoir un succès instantané'.[49] Throughout the text, Vieux imparts words of wisdom to illuminate his reader regarding his or her impressions of life in America. He also makes 'helpful' statements for fellow travellers such as 'On se trompe si on pense que l'argent ouvre toutes les portes aux États-Unis',[50] 'Paris n'est pas toujours une ville du Texas',[51] and 'Toutes les blondes ne sont pas cubaines'.[52] In this way he provides mocked-up op-ed pieces about a variety of topics such as organised crime, money, and wine. Vieux and Fessologue can both be seen to play the role of faux expert on the West, then, providing false points of information for the reader as the 'presenters' of their carefully documented travels. As we shall see, it follows that these spoof experts also produce less than foolproof documentary analysis.

Overly objective analysis

Fessologue takes his commitment to documentary impartiality to a cringeworthy extreme. As we have seen, he is adamant that Africa has been misrepresented in France and that he has the power to lay these misconceptions to rest and provide people (the reader, his girlfriend,

44 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 197.
45 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 203.
46 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 208.
47 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 215.
48 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 218.
49 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 239.
50 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 258.
51 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 133.
52 Laferrière, *Cette grenade*, p. 189.

his friends at Jip's) with a more truthful picture of the continent. His inflated ego and sense of injustice are juxtaposed with his own perpetuation of certain stereotypes of African culture. Insistent upon revealing the 'truth' and overturning clichés, Fessologue nevertheless affirms their veracity outwardly when this works in his favour. For instance, in his attempts to dissuade Couleur d'origine from accompanying him to social gatherings where he is able to meet other women he tells her that Congolese men consider drinking anything but alcohol an insult (Couleur d'origine is teetotal), and that they huddle in corners talking in dialects that she wouldn't understand. Fessologue tells her these things simply because, in his own charming terms, 'il ne faut surtout pas aller dans ces fêtes avec sa copine ou sa femme, on n'emmène pas un sandwich au restaurant'.[53]

Fessologue later expands upon his efforts to give Couleur d'origine a 'real' picture of Africa, although again clarifying stereotypes only when he deems it necessary:

> On avait des discussions sérieuses sur ce qu'elle prenait comme des vérités figées quant à notre condition à nous les nègres alors que c'étaient des clichés en noir et blanc. C'est vrai que moi-même je forçais souvent la caricature de nos mœurs pour parvenir à mes fins, et donc aller seul dans ces fêtes très courues. Pourtant lorsqu'il le fallait je remettais les pendules à l'heure.[54]

Fessologue's strategically selective revelations about stereotypes produce a laughable 'documentary' exposé of racist prejudice. In other instances of his documentary analysis, Fessologue is impartial to the point of absurdity. This comes to the fore when he starts to examine French customs and clichés. For instance, he takes an exaggeratedly objective approach to understanding Parisian slang terminology, patiently picking apart the epithet 'Arabe du coin'. Fessologue has an apparently sincere debate with himself about the accuracy of some of the essentialising terminology that continues to have currency in France today. His lack of concern for the morality of this moniker is part of the embarrassing

53 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 46.
54 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 52.

humour of the scene. Ostentatiously setting out to demystify the linguistic tag that has become a familiar part of Parisian vocabulary, Fessologue conducts an analytical discussion of the appropriateness of using 'Arabe du coin' to describe the owner of his local grocery store. His problem, as he explains, is purely on the level of logic:

> En principe on ne devrait pas l'appeler l'Arabe du coin, mais l'Arabe d'en face. Or depuis la nuit des temps les gens disent toujours l'Arabe du coin, c'est pas à moi d'opérer une révolution radicale en un claquement de doigts. Si on se mettait à remettre en cause tout ce qui rappelle que la langue française est parfois injuste, voire injurieuse à l'égard de certaines catégories de personnes, eh bien on ne s'en sortirait plus.[55]

Fessologue's doubt is prompted not by the derogatory and arbitrary nature of the phrase 'Arabe du coin' but because the shop in question is located opposite his building, not on a corner. His apparently earnest rationalisation for this prejudiced sobriquet is in comic conflict with his abdication of any responsibility to counteract the popularity of the phrase. A tension therefore forms between his documentary-style search for the 'truth' and the seemingly genuine obliviousness of the 'expert' on the cultural and racial implications of the term.

Mabanckou's penchant for taking logic to the point of abstraction has also been noted by Nadra Lajri in her comparison of Mabanckou's humour with that of Azouz Begag. Lajri discusses a scene in which Fessologue lets slip during a conversation at Jip's with Roger Le Franco-Ivoirien that the only functioning road across the Congolese outback dates back to the colonial epoch. Roger responds by asking: '"Vous êtes indépendants depuis bientôt un demi-siècle et tu me dis qu'il n'y a qu'une seule route? Qu'est-ce que vous avez foutu pendant tout ce temps?"'[56] Lajri writes that Roger's raving about the success of colonialism and his exorbitant defence of European slave-traders is part of the author's renunciation of the idea of a logical explanation for stereotypes:

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55 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 110.
56 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 15.

> La récurrence des digressions et des incongruités véhiculées par les monologues désarticule la cohérence textuelle et rend inopérant tout raisonnement logique sur le thème évoqué, créant ainsi un « non-sens ». Les partisans des « aspects positifs de la colonisation » renvoient dos à dos ceux qui la critiquent et ceux qui ont lutté pour l'indépendance sans donner suite à leurs ambitions d'autogestion de leurs pays; tous les clichés et stéréotypes sont évoqués, des plus galvaudés aux plus farfelus et, en les juxtaposant, Mabanckou les démystifient (sic) et leur ôte toute signification logique.[57]

Lajri's analysis veers towards valorising *Black Bazar* as a text that subverts stereotypes by emptying them of reason and logic, but it also supports the idea of a flip-flop between plausible and implausible readings of Mabanckou's work that I argue is central to the type of awkward humour elicited through his mock-documentary analysis of stereotypes. My reasoning here is that, like Roger's endorsement of the colonial settlers who had to 'bosser comme des dingues', the sense of absurdity that characterises Fessologue's stringent adherence to logic in his dissection of the 'Arabe du coin' label could be seen as a 'marker' of documentary parody of the type discussed by Paul Ward.[58]

It is worth noting than Fessologue is not necessarily *always* positioned as an objective onlooker, and sometimes his tone is clearly ironic, such as when he is discussing certain cultural habits of the French. We saw an example of this in Chapter 1 with Fessologue's diatribe about the European penchant for learning the 'tam-tam', and it is an aspect of his narrative that also comes across in his final comments about the 'Arabe du coin'. In the latter example, when he turns his attention to clichéd representations of French men, Fessologue admits that 'On dit l'Arabe du coin, je le dis moi aussi même s'il est en face de notre immeuble et qu'au coin de notre rue il y a plutôt un serrurier qui est un

57 Nadra Lajri, 'L'Humour dans les romans d'Alain Mabanckou et d'Azouz Begag: de l'autodérision à la singularité', *Études littéraires*, 43, 1 (2012), 63–72 (p. 67).
58 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 16.

Français moyen, mais sans baguette et béret basque. . .'.[59] Fessologue's back-handed quip about French national stereotypes pairs up the 'illogic' of the 'Arabe du coin' misnomer and the 'illogic' of a typical Frenchman who is not ostentatiously bearing the symbols of his national identity: a beret and a baguette. It is in this way that Fessologue's painstaking impartial approach to some absurdly reductive and offensive stereotypes manages to generate a scene of hilarious mockumentary incongruity, both when his words appear as objective and when he seems to want to convey a sense of ironic judgement.

In contrast to Fessologue, Vieux in *Cette grenade* maintains that clichés of black men and white women are entirely true. He has supposedly made this discovery after having conducted serious investigations, and he claims to be a mere messenger of the results yielded by his surveys. It is important to note that the quality of Vieux's research is, as one might imagine, debatable. For one thing, Vieux is guilty of skewing his sociological findings by conducting interviews with public figures and authors who are deceased. One of the chapters in *Cette grenade* is set up as a 'Black Hall of Fame' that is compiled of a list of real people. Ice Cube, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Magic Johnson, Toni Morrison, Derek Walcott, Naomi Campbell, Rodney King and James Baldwin all appear in this chapter. Through a variety of reconstructions, hallucinations, and re-enactments, Vieux interacts with this compilation of black celebrities, whom he interviews about race relations and their professions. He also references verifiable newspaper articles (such as a *New York Times* story on Jean-Michel Basquiat) in what can be read as a further attempt to give credence to his 'research'.

Vieux's conversation with these celebrities is part of a parodic play with conventions of documentary, which steeps itself in reality and the lives of real people. As Bill Nichols has observed: 'Documentary film speaks about situations and events involving real people (social actors) who present themselves to us as themselves in stories that convey a plausible

59 Mabanckou, *Black Bazar*, p. 111.

proposal about, or perspective on, the lives, situations, and events portrayed'.[60]Questionable though his methods may be, Vieux is adamant that his claims about clichés are founded on empirical data. For instance, at one point he discusses his novels with a woman in a bar who argues that '"si on accepte vos histoires c'est parce que cela rassure les Blancs. Vos romans leur donnent raison de croire que le Nègre est un sexe itinérant"'. Vieux confirms her statement is true: 'Mais ce n'est pas faux', he replies.[61] His writing, he insists, is founded on well-researched facts and he goes on to explain in more detail his motives for using racist terminology. He confides to her that his initial hope for *Comment faire* was to destroy stereotypes but admits that he was hopelessly deluded:

> Au début, je voulais tout bêtement détruire ces clichés...Ah! Ah! Ah!...Quel naïf j'étais! Je suis tout de suite arrivé à cette conclusion qui m'a littéralement terrifié: la plupart des clichés sur les rapports sexuels entre le Nègre et la Blanche sont vrais. Tout est vrai dans cette histoire. J'ai été d'abord effrayé. Ensuite, j'ai repris mes esprits afin de rendre compte à mes lecteurs des résultats de mon enquête. Je suis un écrivain. Un reporter des rapports humains.[62]

In a typical Laferrièrian twist, Vieux considers himself a 'reporter' on human relations in his capacity as novelist, even though in his novel Vieux claims to be acting as a reporter. Amongst these contradictory claims, the unsettling discovery Vieux contends to have made in writing *Comment faire* can be seen as part of Laferrière's ironic use of truth-telling modes of narration. When paired with the subject of racial hierarchy, Vieux's whole-hearted confirmation of clichés generates a baffling and cringeworthy comic effect in which the reader is left vacillating over whether to take Vieux seriously or not.

Vieux anticipates a certain level of scepticism in response to his insistence that stereotypes are legitimate. In a dialogue in which he maintains the 'truth' about clichés of

60 Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 2nd edn (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 14.
61 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 157.
62 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 158.

white Americans he pre-empts the charge of recycling stereotypes using an imaginary voice to deal with potential doubts about his claims to truth:

> Vous vous dites: Hé quoi! Il reprend ce cliché éculé de l'Amérique naïve, c'est fini depuis longtemps tout ça, vieux...Eh bien! mon frère, ça marche encore. La mécanique fonctionne comme si elle était neuve. Faut dire que deux cents ans, c'est à peine un clin d'œil dans l'histoire de l'humanité, vraiment rien […] Ils sont blonds, grands, athlétiques. (T'es sûr que t'en mets pas un peu, là? Non, frère, ils sont vraiment comme dans nos rêves.)[63]

Vieux's assurances to the reader that his or her preconceptions of America and Americans are entirely accurate thwarts expectations of the documentary text as intended to reveal the constructedness of racial, cultural or national stereotypes. This incongruity runs the length of the text: Vieux goes about his journalistic mission with disconcerting nonchalance, producing an incongruous mixture of highly disciplined note-taking and provocatively flippant conclusions. On the one hand, he appears dedicated to the professionalism of journalistic writing, stating that 'J'ai rempli huit calepins de notes prises sur le vif et j'ai fait des centaines de photos'.[64] On the other hand, his commentary is drenched with sarcastic disregard for cultural nuance that contradicts his ostensibly rigorous investigative practice: 'Donc, je suis allé un peu partout en Amérique du Nord. J'ai regardé vivre les Noirs, les Blancs, les Rouges, les Jaunes. Un peut tout le monde, quoi! Eh bien! mon vieux, tout ce qu'on dit de l'Amérique est vrai'.[65] The jarring contradiction between format and content stymies expectations of the postcolonial author's intentions to enlighten his or her readership about clichés.

Unlike Mabanckou and Laferrière, Vieux and Fessologue take themselves very seriously. These two presenters of the Western world put forward their sociological findings as the factual basis for the claims they make in their fictional works about stereotypes in a

63 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, pp. 20–21.
64 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 24.
65 Laferrière, *Cette Grenade*, p. 20.

way that is designed to embarrass the reader. This embarrassment stems from the constantly colliding claims to truth and fact in these texts that produce an awkward or uneasy experience for the reader. As a result, cringe comedy might be seen as a way of highlighting the idea that postcolonial fiction is somehow *expected* to provide a realistic reflection of reality.

Mabanckou and Laferrière have frequently been lauded for their capacity to 'deconstruct' racial clichés. The danger with this assertion is that if postcolonial novels are routinely examined with an eye to the text's ability to unsettle myths and stereotypes about race and to provide in their stead a more factual version of postcolonial culture then postcolonial authors will routinely be denied a creative freedom that is afforded to other writers of fiction. We might wonder, too, whether it is even possible for the ironic repetition of stereotypes to work in this way, and it is to this question that I will now turn.

Taking Stereotypes 'Seriously'

Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer and *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine* are perhaps less obviously mock-documentary fictions than the pair of novels that I have just examined, but there are still aspects of these works that can be understood as part of a play upon documentary conventions. Premised as they are on the notion of revealing a higher source of truth or being able to impart a certain wisdom about myths of black sexuality, from the outset the How To novels can be seen to partake in a parody of the claims to revelation, explanation, and enlightenment that are traditionally associated with the documentary genre and with guide books. In the postcolonial context, this postmodern challenge to authority means that these texts could be seen to ironically invert the kind of pedagogical standpoint taken up in colonial literature.

Both How To novels can also be seen to manipulate documentary traditions by playing upon the authenticity that the use of documents and documentation bestows upon a text. This is something Barbara Foley points out in her work on documentary fictions such as

Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo-Jumbo* and *Flight to Canada*. Foley writes that in the latter novels Reed 'engages in a parodic play with narrative forms that have supposedly encoded the essential truths of Afro-American experience', and she goes on to argue that in *Mumbo-Jumbo* Reed splices his narrative with material such as photographs and advertising posters in order to demonstrate that 'the evidence that can be used to validate one version of the past can be creatively rearranged to prove another'.[66] Parallels of this parodic technique come to the fore in Vieux's constant citations of established historical documents such as the Quran (twenty-three citations from this text in total) and also, and as we shall see later in more detail, through Beyala's inclusion of recipes in her narrative.

The How To guides can also be read as mockumentary fiction because of the way that the ironic repetition of stereotypes in these works produces what Middleton calls an 'awkward aesthetic'. By sustaining the notion of an underlying truth behind stereotypes and by humouring historical prejudices, Beyala and Laferrière highlight the complexity of parody as a means of subversion, foregrounding the fact that the ironic repetition of stereotypes can often go awry. As I mentioned earlier, Paul Ward argues that some mockumentary texts drag out the sense of reality with regards to their fictional content in order to derive humour 'from the programme's *sustained* plausibility, rather than the alternation between plausibility and implausibility that is characteristic of parody more usually'.[67] In other words, sustained plausibility creates a cringe-comic effect that comes from a continued sense of realism or documentary authenticity, producing what Ward calls the 'gruesome' plausibility of shows like *The Office* (2001; 2003). It is the squirm-inducing effect of maintaining mythologies with a straight face that I will concentrate on in the following analysis.

Eating Exotic

66 Foley, pp. 258–259.
67 Ward, p. 71.

The narrator of Laferrière's 1985 bestseller *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer*, Vieux, starts his commentary on life in Montreal with words that express incredulity: 'Pas croyable'.[68] Vieux's indignant disbelief at the behaviour of people around him – in this case his roommate Bouba – constitutes a running gag in the text, and is frequently the result of his interactions with his lovers. The stereotypes of black masculinity that Vieux ironically plays up to in his many attempts to chat up white college girls (he is, after all, writing a book called *Paradis du Dragueur Nègre*) may appear patently false to Vieux, but they are apparently quite plausible to the majority of the women he hopes to take to bed. Like Vieux, the narrator of Beyala's 'How To' guide *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine*, Aïssatou, also uses stereotypes to her advantage by playing up to a clichéd portrait of African femininity in a bid to capture the heart of her neighbour Monsieur Bolobolo through his stomach. Along with clichés of masculinity and femininity both 'How To' guides are also filled with parodic play with the plausibility of two stereotypes rooted in colonial ideology: the 'savage' and the 'cannibal'. These form part of the narrators' ploy to use clichés as a strategy of seduction: their successes and failures in this regard create moments of excruciating embarrassment between the characters.

The first set of examples I look at here involves the protagonists playing along with the cliché of savagery by claiming to eat certain 'exotic' foods. In Vieux's account of life in Montreal, it is the protagonist's (main) lover Miz Littérature whose gullibility is repeatedly the source of the cringe comedy. She consistently falls victim to the narrator's toying with the 'reality' of colonial clichés, and Vieux goes so far as to suggest that Miz Littérature only likes him because she has been indoctrinated by myths about black masculinity and clings to clichés of wild, bestial sexuality. Throughout the text we are constantly prompted to feel embarrassed by the way Miz Littérature and her friends seem to accept racial stereotypes with a disconcerting willingness. In some instances, the reader is made aware of the fact that Vieux is humouring expectations of black male 'violence' and savagery for fun. A good

68 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 11.

example of this occurs when Vieux meets Miz Punk. He gains the latter's interest by claiming to be from Harlem and then seduces her by impersonating an iconic figure of black violence, admitting the effort he makes to nod his head at her with 'ce regard très Malcolm X'.[69]

Things do not always run smoothly for Vieux, though, and sometimes he is too convincing in his risky role-play with colonial clichés. The best example of this is the Miz Chat gaffe. In this instance, Vieux accidentally terrifies rather than turns on a prospective lover, Miz Chat, by claiming that he is from a country where people eat cats. Vieux goes home with his date, Miz Chat, who introduces him to her two cats: one 'Lady Barbarella d'Odessa' and one 'Blue Salvador Nasseau alias Tonton'. Vaguely perturbed by the cat-orientated décor of Miz Chat's apartment and the photographs of 'famous' cats hanging on the walls,[70] Vieux describes an atmosphere of tense silence when she disappears into the kitchen. He confides that he has difficulty talking to strangers, especially when they are white women who are not in the same room as him. According to Vieux, whose intimacy with white women is constantly interfered with by his sense that they are attracted to him solely because of a latent fascination with racial clichés, he and Miz Chat are only able to talk to each other from 'des années-lumière de distance métaphysique'.[71] Vieux's more immediate and pragmatic problem is the space separating the lounge and kitchen, which forces him to raise his voice so that Miz Chat can hear him. She demands that he repeat himself when he mumbles something about cats:

> – Quoi!
>
> – Je dis que...
>
> – J'entends rien.
>
> – Je disais que...

69 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, pp. 102–103.
70 Lustrée and Fourrure were Malraux's cats; Bébert was Céline's cat, and there are also references to cats belonging to Léautaud, Remy de Gourmont, Huxley, Claude Roy, Cocteau, Colette, and Carson McCullers.
71 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, p. 139.

– Parle plus fort.

– Tu sais, chez moi, on mange les chats.

Cette fois, elle a bien entendu.[72]

The ill-judged jest brings the couple's interaction to a shuddering halt. In spite of what he describes as the pair's 'courageous' attempts to change the topic of conversation, Vieux concedes that it was impossible to rescue the situation: 'Trop tard. C'était fait'.[73]

As the discussion between them disintegrates, Vieux mulls over his choice of words. In the monologue that follows he does not deny the truth of his statement or hint at his ironic intent for the reader's benefit. Rather than provide any clarification about his claim, Vieux simply exonerates himself from blame, possibly because he still thinks he can win Miz Chat's affections: 'Je prends alors conscience de la gaffe du siècle que je viens de commettre et c'est pourquoi j'ajoute aussitôt : – Naturellement, pas moi'.[74] Once the initial tension has subsided, or as Vieux he puts it, once 'L'alerte est donc passée',[75] Vieux retreats to the bathroom where he stares at his reflection in the mirror and repeatedly asks himself why he felt the need to comment on the subject of eating cats at all. He concludes that his outburst was an unconscious act of self-sabotage, an involuntary impulse against the idea that he might be climbing another rung in the social ladder by sleeping with Miz Chat. He starts playing around with the idea of being a 'cat eater' and invents a title for himself: 'L'Étrangleur des chats'.

Still hopeful of recovering the situation, Vieux decides to put the incident behind him and starts gearing up for a night of passion. He washes his face and flashes a grin in the mirror. Emerging from the bathroom, he finds Miz Chat cowering in the corridor, clearly terrified that he could polish off her pets as a pre-coital snack:

72 Laferrière, *Comment faire,* p. 139.
73 Laferrière, *Comment faire,* p. 139.
74 Laferrière, *Comment faire,* p. 139.
75 Laferrière, *Comment faire,* p. 140.

> Je me lave le visage, vigoureusement. Les dents blanches, l'œil féroce. Sexy. Prêt pour la guerre des sexes. Je sors. Dans le couloir, Miz Chat, l'air paniqué, tient dans ses bras Lady Barbarella d'Odessa et le flegmatique Sir Blue Salvador Nasseau. Si je ne perds pas trop de temps en d'inutiles excuses, il y a encore une chance d'attraper le dernier métro, celui de 1 h 30.[76]

The chapter culminates with this moment of cringe comedy in which Miz Chat is visibly petrified by the thought of Vieux's cravings for cat meat. At the same time, Vieux himself is caught in the embarrassment of his failed attempt to seduce her with his sexed-up parody of savagery complete with 'ferocious' flashing eyes. Instead of consoling her or coming clean about the truth of his claim, Vieux then flees the apartment without explanation or 'excuses inutiles', escaping in time to catch the last train home. The embarrassing experience of reading this scene is potentially two-fold: first, because of the behaviour of the horrified Miz Chat and second, because readers may come to realise that they too are the target of the text's ambiguity regarding the reliability of the narrator's references to 'authentic' eating practices. Maria Fernanda Arentsen points out in her article aimed at gauging to what extent Laferrière's work is successful at subverting clichés that 'certains stéréotypes comme celui du Nègre primitif, ont été déconstruits par le discours du narrateur. Mais il ne semble pas que le mythe du Nègre grand baiseur ait été déconstruit. Le narrateur, en effet, ne paraît pas vouloir le démentir'.[77] By highlighting Vieux's own hesitancy to 'clear up' stereotypes of his sexual prowess, Arensten (unintentionally) highlights the way Laferrière showcases parody's ever-present potential to backfire. Her focus on the 'success' of Laferrière's subversion of individual stereotypes, though, pitches Vieux's hesitancy to rectify the myth as a failure and succumbs to the temptation to valorise Laferrière's fiction based on the extent to which it can be said to overturn clichés. Instead, we could read this as the author's winking warning to the reader that parodic play with stereotypes carries serious risks.

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76 Laferrière, *Comment faire,* pp. 140–141.
77 Maria Fernanda Arentsen, 'Le rôle – complexe – des stéréotypes' dans le discours du narrateur migrant de *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 79 (2007), 93–110 (p. 108).

Regardless of whether or not the practice of eating cats 'really' happens in Vieux's home country in the novel (and bear in mind that we are never explicitly told where Vieux comes from even if many critics make the assumption that the protagonist, like Laferrière, comes from Haiti), in various parts of the world the consumption of cats and dogs is not uncommon. It is a practice that has been targeted by Western animal rights groups who see the eating of an animal typically domesticated in Europe and North America as a form of cruelty. Even if the eating of cat in the Caribbean is routinely denied as a derogatory myth, the idea itself is by no means a 'logical absurdity'. We could say, then, that Laferrière uses the plausibility of this practice to prompt a sense of continued confusion about his intentions behind the repetition of this 'myth' as part of Vieux's parody of the stereotype of savagery. In other words, Laferrière sustains a sense of reality around the myth of savagery in order to generate embarrassment in a way that is also discernible in Beyala's reproduction of 'African' recipes in her novel *Comment cuisiner*.

Beyala's text abounds with examples of embarrassing social blunders caused by the ambiguity surrounding the protagonist's claims of exotic eating practices. In true mock-documentary fashion, Beyala's novel-slash-cookbook interweaves verifiable documents with fictional ones. She does this by dividing her text into three components: a made-up mythical story about the seductive power of African cuisine that serves as a prologue, a main fictional narrative, and, spliced within this, twenty-five recipes. These recipes range from serving instructions for smoked antelope, crocodile, and porcupine, to directions on how to prepare the somewhat less exciting 'salade exotique' (mangos, shrimp, canned sweet corn and avocado). As I mentioned, the appendage of documents is conventionally used to bestow credibility onto a documentary narrative; Beyala uses them in a postmodern mockumentary way to generate a tense sense of sustained plausibility about the stereotype of exoticism that is key to her protagonist's success as a *séductrice*. The tension surrounding the credibilty of the recipes is also a crucial part of the way the author sets up of many of the novel's most comic moments.

On the one hand, Aïssatou props up the authenticity of the recipes by claiming that they have been handed down to her from her mother. The memory of her mother apparently helps her decide which dish to make. She imagines that her mother 'm'aurait serrée dans ses bras pour faire entrer dans mon cœur ce que les mots ne pouvaient expliquer : « Un bon ngombo au paprika t'éclaircira les idées, ma fille ! » before the recipe for *ngombo* appears.[78] She imagines too that 'maman se serait précipitée dans la forêt. Ses doigts agiles auraient bougé sans cesse […] Ses yeux noirs perçants auraient fouillé sous les feuilles mortes. Et au moment où l'on s'y serait attendu le moins, hop là, elle aurait extirpé une tortue de brousse' before the recipe for *tortue de brousse aux bananes platains vertes* is presented on the following page.[79] At another point in the narrative Andela regrets not making a certain shrimp dish, lamenting that 'j'aurais dû faire comme maman : cuisiner un attieké aux crevettes' before we find the *attieké aux crevettes* recipe[80] and after she hears her mother's voice offering advice : '« Mange du veau, ma fille, aurait dit maman. Sa chair tendre permet de retourner à l'enfance insouciante »' we are presented with the recipe for *veau aux légumes*.[81] Aïssatou admits that she has had to revise the recipes as a result of living in France. She concedes that she cannot faithfully reproduce the dishes of her ancestors: 'Je passe en revue la cuisine de ma mère et de ma grand-mère. Je revisite les plats traditionnels qu'on ne peut pas aisément confectionner : le kui, le sanga bâsse, le bongo tchobi ou encore les gâteaux de termites'.[82] Although Aïssatou's admission could be seen to undermine the idea that any of these recipes is genuine, I'd argue that her confession works to bolster the notion that there exists an original from which she has been forced to deviate, and that this in fact enhances the plausibility of the recipe's authenticity.

On the other hand, Aïssatou insinuates that she is only returning to her heritage and cooking 'plats traditionnels' because she thinks this is the most effective way to seduce Bolobolo. Before Bolobolo moved into her building, Aïssatou seemed to be suffering from

78 Calixthe Beyala, *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000), p. 14.
79 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 27.
80 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 35.
81 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 41.
82 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 113.

anorexia, barely eating any food except grated carrots and packet soup. Aïssatou admits to her own complicity in the falseness of her transformation into a 'traditional' African woman who cooks meals for her man in a scene that also serves to illustrate the comic vein of Aïssatou's fervent desire. This appears early in the novel when she sees Bolobolo on a date from her window and, despite the frosty sarcastic reception from the pair in the street, she yells down to Bolobolo that she will take his senile mother bean patties the following day. After this ostentatious display of generosity she admits that she has been disingenuous, betraying herself in order to get closer to Bolobolo. Moving away from the window, she admits that 'Quand je retourne à mon fauteuil, l'histoire de l'homme qui n'aimait pas les haricots, et qui par amour pour une donzelle en mangea et perdit son honneur, m'assaille. Je me dis que ce n'est pas un hasard si cette fable me revient en mémoire'.[83] By admitting to her own misgivings about using food to seduce Bolobolo early in the novel, Aïssatou in some ways casts doubt on the authenticity of the recipes that she will use to entice Bolobolo throughout the rest of the text.

The tension between seeing the recipes as authentic or fake documents works to heighten the acute awkwardness of a scene in which Aïssatou takes on her rival, Bolobolo's girlfriend Mademoiselle Bijou. Bijou is a woman with African heritage who was raised in France and who, according to Aïssatou, 'a échappé à la malédiction de la peau noire'.[84] She is scandalised by the types of food Aïssatou cooks on a regular basis. Aïssatou takes advantage of Bijou's incredulity to muscle in on her relationship with Bolobolo, inviting herself to join the pair for dinner one evening. Struggling to fathom the idea that animals such as monkey are consumed for food in some parts of the world, squeamish Bijou is shocked by Aïssatou's assertions about how tasty she finds boa constrictor. Her reaction ruptures the dinner conversation:

83 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 56.
84 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 99.

> – Je n'ai jamais aimé la cuisine africaine, dit-elle pour accentuer nos différences. Je dois avouer que ma mère, toute noire qu'elle était, paix à son âme, n'en préparait jamais! Paraît qu'ils mangent des singes, ces Nègres!
> – Du serpent boa également, dis-je. (Puis, je prends monsieur Bolobolo à témoin :) C'est excellent, n'est-ce pas?[85]

In the cringeworthy comic tension of this scene, Aïssatou takes Bolobolo aside in a cunning move to ostracise Bijou who is left shuddering at the thought of the foods mentioned – 'Rien qu'à l'imaginer, j'ai les poils qui se dressent sur ma peau, dit Bijou en simulant de forts frissons'.[86] In other words, Aïssatou's penchant for snacking on snake is her winning move against her rival as from this point on Bolobolo begins to visit her to satisfy all of his carnal pleasures. It should be noted, though, that Aïssatou is not completely effective in her personalised parody of 'savage' African culinary traditions: at the end of the novel we learn that Bolobolo has not been faithful to Aïssatou and that he has secretly fathered a child with another woman. Although Aïssatou succeeded in seducing him, then, Beyala spikes her story of parodic success and in the same stroke touches upon another stereotype, this time of African masculinity.

Aïssatou again triumphs in her ironic sustaining of the savage stereotype when, one afternoon while busy in the kitchen, she becomes aware of a bustle in the hallway. Aïssatou discovers that her neighbours are up in arms because of the powerful aromas leaking from her flat and the concierge expresses the group's indignation in unabashedly racist terms:

> « Avec ces odeurs, elle va finir par pourrir l'immeuble! » maugrée-t-elle, folle de rage. Elle vaporise les escaliers des roses de printemps, des verveines boisées et des Airwick vaselinisés. « Ah ces Nègres alors! Comment peut-on manger des choses qui puent pareillement? ».[87]

85 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 99.
86 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 99.
87 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 72.

The concierge starts spreading the rumour that Aïssatou is raising livestock in her apartment including 'des chèvres, des poulets, des canards et même des cochons antillais', using this outlandish lie to insinuate that all of the building's inhabitants risk getting yellow fever. The threat of tropical illness pushes the growing crowd of hysterical and gullible neighbours, led by the concierge, to confront Aïssatou about her cooking.

Aware of the commotion gathering outside her door, Aïssatou makes it clear that she understands the reasons behind it. Sarcastically, she gives her neighbours credit for their 'civilised' attempts to collect evidence of their accusations before calling in the 'services d'hygiène': 'Mais à chaque accusation doit correspondre une preuve. On n'est pas chez des sauvages et mes voisins sont des braves gens'.[88] Aïssatou strides over to open the door and takes the congregation in the corridor by surprise. The embarrassed crowd rapidly disperse and Aïssatou plays along with their racist rumours, asking the crowd: 'Vous êtes venus écouter les bruits de la ferme?'[89] Baulking at the question her neighbours retreat *en masse* as Aïssatou scoffs at their excuses: her humouring of their racist fear-mongering represents a resounding success, and for the reader the narrator's reference to her own 'narquois' tones make it easy to distinguish the target and intention of her irony.

In both novels the white-female-foil characters of Miz Chat and Mademoiselle Bijou, Miz Punk and the Concierge (amongst many others) serve as the butt of the protagonists' parodic jests. They are there to fall for the stereotype of savagery that is sustained through the claims made by Vieux and Aïssatou about their 'wild' and 'exotic' eating habits. These white female characters are in and of themselves stereotypes, as Corrie Scott has noted in reference to Laferrière's text. In *De Groulx à Laferrière: un parcours de la race dans la littérature québécoise* (2014), Scott writes that these characters are rooted to reality through Laferrière's use of banal details. In her persuasive reading of *Comment faire*, Scott argues that in Laferrière's text:

88 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 73.
89 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 73.

> L'ancrage référentiel n'est pas inspiré par l'autobiographie, mais par la nécessité de garder une ombre de vraisemblance. Ainsi, les représentations autrement parodiques et essentialistes ne peuvent tout simplement pas être rejetées comme excessives puisqu'on y retrouve tant de détails banals du quotidien.[90]

Scott's observation here underscores the way that Laferrière creates scenes and characters that never completely move away from the realm of *vraisemblance*: his stereotyped characters tread the fine line between the plausible and the implausible.

Building upon Scott's analysis, we could perhaps compare the experience of interpreting Laferrière's plausible and implausible text with the type of mental fluctuation that Linda Hutcheon describes as a 'Third Note'. Rather than envisage irony as a type of direct semantic inversion, Hutcheon champions the idea that we fluctuate between both the said and the unsaid meanings when interpreting irony – and by extension parody – in a way that produces a separate reading, or what she calls a 'third note'. Hutcheon uses an example from E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study on the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* to illustrate this concept. In the latter volume, Gombrich states that in order to answer the question of whether we consciously flip back and forth between 'meanings' of a representation 'we are compelled to look for what is "really there", to see the shape apart from its interpretation and this, we soon discover, is not really possible'.[91] Against Gombrich's claim that 'our eyes can't experience both readings at the same time'[92] Hutcheon asserts that, on the contrary 'when it comes to the ducks and rabbits of ironic meaning, our minds almost can. In interpreting irony, we can and do oscillate very rapidly between the said and the unsaid'.[93] The ducks and rabbits that Hutcheon is referring to can

90 Corrie Scott, *De Groulx à Laferrière: un parcours de la race dans la littérature québécoise* (Montreal: Les Éditions XYZ, 2014), p. 161
91 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, 2nd edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 5.
92 Gombrich, p. 5.
93 Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 60.

be discerned in the image below [see Figure 1] which she uses as an example of the type of back and forth movement between readings that characterises the ironic text.

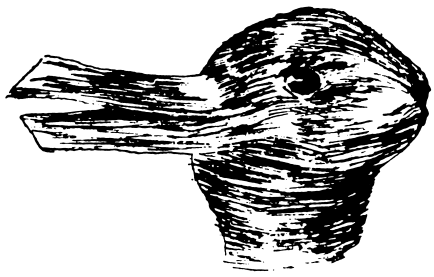

Figure 1 'Rabbit or duck?'

Source: From Scheidemann, *Experiments in General Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929)[94]

So, although Hutcheon's recourse to optical illusion was part of a more general effort to break down the standard binary of traditional ironic criticism, her concept of the 'third note', although admittedly fairly abstract, nevertheless provides a helpful visual demonstration of the type of sustained mental vacillation that is generated by Laferrière's distinctly cringeworthy comic style in his mockumentary novel.

Eating People is Wrong

Both How To texts also contain examples of sustained plausibility in which the ambiguity of ironic expression is turned against the reader as opposed to characters in the novel. In these instances, rather than play off the gullibility of white female characters, both narrators teasingly test the reader's propensity to find stereotypes plausible. This turn on the reader is

94 John F. Kihlstrom, a professor of psychology at Berkeley, wrote an unpublished letter to the editor of the journal *Trends in the Cognitive Sciences* in 2004 in a bid to clear up confusion as to where this image originated. Kihlstrom traces the image of the duck-rabbit figure back to its appearance in the German humour magazine *Fliegende Blätter* that was published in Munich on October 23, 1892 (p. 147). The image was published by *Harper's Weekly* on November 19th, 1892 (p. 1114), and reappeared in the work of American psychologist Joseph Jastrow in 1899. Wittgenstein's inclusion of it in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) came later in the twentieth century, despite the image being most frequently attributed to him. In Hutcheon's work *Irony's Edge* it appears on p. 59. Unpublished letter accessed online at <http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/JastrowDuck.htm> [accessed 15 May 2015].

achieved by evoking the cliché of cannibalism. In Vieux's case there is a good example of his more mischievous play upon the possibility of cannibalistic urges when he pretends to be offended by Miz Littérature's doubts about his naturally pearly-white teeth. In a parenthetical tirade triggered by a glimpse of Miz Littérature's tube of toothpaste, *Ultra brite*, he makes this angry digression:

> Le sac béant de Miz Littérature laisse voir une brosse à dents (il y a déjà une constellation de brosses à dents sur mon lavabo), un tube de dentifrice *Ultra brite* (pense-t-elle que la blancheur des dents du Nègre est uniquement un mythe? Eh bien, détrompe-toi, Wasp. Nenni, pure laine. Pur ivoire sur bois d'ébène!).[95]

Vieux's ironic play with the plausibility of his own desire for human flesh can be read as an ironic double-bluff aimed at confusing the reader by confirming the 'truth' of the cliché. His antagonistic tone toward Miz Littérature stretches to include a more general 'white reader', as signified by the acronym Wasp (white Anglo-Saxon protestant). In this way, the text takes on a complex intertwining of multiple postcolonial contexts since although the term 'Wasp' is not specific to Canada, it does nevertheless designate a specific cultural community that, when coupled with Vieux's reference to 'pure laine' (a term used to designate Canadians who can trace their heritage back to French colonial ancestors, emphasised in Laferrière's text by the rhyming of 'laine' and 'ébène'), gives a dual direction to Vieux's scathing tones.[96] Corrie Scott's analysis is helpful here again, since she suggests that regardless of his or her racial background a reader of this passage is deliberately made to feel uncomfortable by Vieux's words. Scott advocates seeing Vieux's invocation of the Wasp figure as an imagined white reader who is being addressed alongside Miz Littérature. In Scott's eyes, the Wasp is not a reference to the reader of Laferrière's text 'qui lui n'est peut-être pas « wasp »

95 Laferrière, *Comment faire*, pp. 27–28.
96 This resonance is kept in the English translation as: '(does she think the Negro's sparkling white teeth are pure myth? Well, think again, WASP. No kidding, it's the real thing. Ivory jewels on an ebony ring!)'. *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*, trans. by David Homel, 2nd edn (Vancouver, BC: Douglas and McIntyre, 2010), p. 21.

ou « pure laine »' but a figurative white reader 'à l'intérieur du roman qui est malgré tout imposé au lecteur réel'.[97] She explains that:

> En effet, cette situation risque de solliciter un sentiment d'inconfort chez le lecteur, peu importe son statut racial. Certains lecteurs blancs, par exemple, n'ayant pas l'habitude d'associer leur identité à une race, accepteront peut-être difficilement la blancheur, surtout une blancheur injurieusement étiquetée comme telle.[98]

In her argument against criticism that reads Laferrière's text as representation of a 'réalité vécue', Scott goes on to describe the 'véritable dilemme' of reading *Comment faire* and suggests that 'l'exploitation ironique des clichés, dans le roman, suscite avant tout de l'incertitude, et le lecteur n'est jamais sûr s'il est ou non l'objet de plaisanteries'.[99] Scott's points about the over-simplification of reading the text as a documentation of the reality of life as an immigrant in Montreal and her separation between the imagined white reader, the Wasp, and the real reader converges with my own argument on two levels. First, Scott's analysis supports the idea that the critical response to *Comment faire* has been to consider it somehow more factual than fictional. Secondly, it underscores the importance of the text's ability to generate discomfort for the reader by shedding light on his or her reactions to the ironic confirmation of racial clichés. My account of Laferrière's work is distinct from Scott's, though, as her work doesn't link the dilemma posed by Laferrière's work to a sense of 'awkwardness' that I suggest is part of the experience of reading the text. But Scott's analysis is helpful here in reinforcing the suggestion that I have made throughout this chapter regarding the uncomfortable uneasiness created by Laferrière's jokes, and, to an extent, supports my overall argument in this thesis about how postcolonial parodies can generate a complex and sometimes troubling kind of comic effect that should be understood as more than simply a means for an author to get across a subversive or satirical point.

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97 Scott, p. 164.
98 Scott, p. 164.
99 Scott, p. 170.

Beyala uses a similarly stretched ironic ruse in her treatment of the cliché of cannibalism. Aïssatou's seemingly sincere suggestion that she wants to consume parts of Bolobolo's face is not flagged up as an ironic gag. This happens when she soothes Bolobolo's anger one evening after work by conjuring up a fantasy about cooking and ingesting his boss. Although Aïssatou insinuates that Bolobolo will not act upon these fantasies of carnivorous behaviour, the scene works to create a sense of uncertainty around the 'plausibility' of this cliché because of the way Aïssatou references cannibalism with apparent casualness, whispering into his ear as she massages his neck:

> – Ton patron t'a tant humilié que t'as envie de te venger, c'est ça?
>
> Silence et respiration précipitée.
>
> – T'a envie de l'étrangler, c'est ça?
>
> – Oui, dit-il brusquement en se tournant vers moi. Oui, pour de bon.
>
> – Alors, on va l'attacher, dis-je.
>
> – Lui bander les yeux.
>
> – Lui couper la langue.
>
> – L'obliger à l'avaler.
>
> – Lui arracher les yeux.
>
> – Les cuisiner dans une sauce piquante et l'obliger à les manger.
>
> – On fera sécher ses intestins au soleil![100]

This can be read as a parodic play with the cliché of cannibalism in a prolonged and playful evocation of the myth of anthropophagy.

On another occasion, Aïssatou claims that she wants to cut off parts of Bolobolo's face and body. Her grisly admission is aired on an evening when she is seeking revenge for Bolobolo's treatment of her after she discovers that he is seeing her and Bijou on the same day. Aïssatou plans to give Bolobolo food poisoning in order to ensure that he is unable to

100 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, pp. 127–128.

visit Mademoiselle Bijou later that night. In order to keep him by her side, she prepares Bolobolo a meal of saka-saka and secretly ingests charcoal to stop herself from reacting to the sprinkling of potassium that she adds to the dish. She puts on a façade of submissive adoration as she dishes up the food 'soumise et pieuse comme autrefois les servantes d'Ishtar'.[101] Although the reader is alerted to Aïssatou's affectation of submission as a 'sex-slave-goddess', there is no indication that the other cliché being evoked by the protagonist (that of the cannibalistic, barbaric, savage) is being similarly staged. Aïssatou asserts that 'j'ai envie de lui couper le nez, les oreilles, le sexe et les mains', and she goes on to add a sense of macabre sincerity to her claim by suggesting that 'Ce mélange de perversité, d'érotisme et de méchanceté m'effraie moi-même'.[102] The lack of evident ironic intent in her allusions to cannibalism prompts the reader to question whether Aïssatou is indeed ironising a cliché or making a genuine confession of bloodthirsty desire.

* * * * * *

Beyala's parodic play upon clichés in *Comment cuisiner* has been met with consternation by readers who do not appreciate her text's deliberately cringe-inducing style of comedy. One reviewer summed up her disappointment in a blog responding to the text's humour 'au second degré' by writing that, as a feminist, it was inappropriate for Beyala to portray a woman so willing to replicate stereotypes of femininity:

> Pour ma part je n'ai pas été sensible à cet humour, j'ai trouvé décalé qu'une féministe engagée puisse donner une image aussi restrictive de la femme, qui selon la description de la mère de l'héroïne se limite au sexe, au ménage et à la cuisine. Certaines descriptions ou situations sont manifestement caricaturales, et pourtant elles sont encore tellement vraies!

101 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, p. 119.
102 Beyala, *Comment cuisiner*, pp. 119–200.

> Et, comme pour finir de contrarier, l'auteur parle d'amour pour évoquer cette relation profondément stéréotypée, conflictuelle et emplie de manipulation.[103]

The risk that readers won't pick up on the ironic vein of either of these protagonists' play upon clichés is also apparent when we consider the reaction to Laferrière's novel, which aroused controversy when it was adapted for cinema and released as a film in the United States. The NAACP lobbied unsuccessfully against the title, which was censored in several major American newspapers,[104] and some cinemas refused to show the film even if, as *Rolling Stone* pointed out, 'Despite the teaser title, this is not a racist porn film'.[105] The film was panned across the board by critics from Los Angeles to Chicago to New York with a review by Rita Kempley from the *Washington Post* providing perhaps the most fervent and unequivocal denunciation. Kempley summed up her feelings towards what she described as an 'offensively titled low-budget look at scoring with white women in Montreal' in the final lines of her article, which are as follows:

> 'How to Make Love...' manages to be as piddling as it is pretentious, as racist as it is sexist, as self-hating as it is self-congratulatory what with its jokey references to cannibals and 'Cartesian niggers' and 'the myth of the black stud'. The NAACP has denounced the title for the use of the word Negro, but Tired is actually the operative word.[106]

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103 A.-S. Muriel, 'Calixthe Beyala: *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine*' (8 December 2009) <http://littexpress.over-blog.net/article-calixthe-beyala-comment-cuisiner-son-mari-a-l-africaine-40773642.html> [accessed 3 January 2016].
104 Janet Maslin, 'Movie Review: How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired (1989), *The New York Times* (New York, 8 June 1990) <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9C0CE5D7103FF93BA35755C0A966958260> [accessed 22 December 2015].
105 Peter Travers, 'How To Make Love to a Negro', *Rolling Stone* (New York, 8 June 1990) <http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/how-to-make-love-to-a-negro-without-getting-tired-19900608> [accessed 12 August 2015].
106 Rita Kempley, 'How To Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired', *Washington Post* (Washington DC, 6 July 1990) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/howtomakelovetoanegrowithoutgettingtirednrkempley_a0a01f.htm> [accessed 10 April 2015].

By comparison, European reactions to the film were muted, even 'indifferent', according to David Beriss, who conducted interviews with members of the Caribbean diaspora in the wake of the film's release in Paris in August 1989. Beriss noted his surprise at the lack of outrage or protest from his informants and the fact that the review of the film which appeared in *Le Monde* fixated on the unknown origins of its leading man (who is only known as 'Man' in the movie). Beriss asserts that for French reviewers 'the film provided neither an interesting view on some other culture nor a particularly good performance from its rising star'.[107] The reason for the interest in the protagonist is perhaps better understood in light of certain facts about the film's funding that Bill Marshall points out in *Quebec National Cinema* (2001). Marshall asserts that France had a vested interest in the film as one of its co-producers, having insisted on the presence of Ivorian actor Isaach de Bankolé who appeared in the role of Vieux and having financed 20 percent of the movie's 2.5 million dollar budget (although Marshall doesn't specify which funding body provided this financial support).[108]

In light of the way that the texts portray characters who fail to grasp the playful dimension to the narrators' use of stereotypes, we could conclude that Beyala and Laferrière both anticipate some of the critical responses to their writing within their own texts. So, despite the fact that their works are frequently praised for their subversion of stereotypes, both Beyala and Laferrière can be seen to shed light on the fact that parodying prejudiced conceptions of race to subversive ends is not a straightforward procedure. Their mock-documentary novels point out the likelihood that readers will misinterpret the intention behind parodies of race, and in this respect the authors display an awareness of the complexity of parodic expression and its comic effect that postcolonial criticism tends to skim over. Moreover, by upholding postmodern conceptualisations of parodic play as

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107 David Beriss, 'Culture-as-Race or Race-as-Culture: Caribbean Ethnicity and the Ambiguity of Cultural Identity in French Society', in *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference*, ed. by Herrick Chapman and Laura L. Frader (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 111–140 (pp. 125–126).
108 Bill Marshall, *Quebec National Cinema* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 274.

inherently complicit, these texts use the comic value of sustained plausibility to illuminate the problems with the interpretive strategies that are often taken up in postcolonial criticism to deal with the ironic repetition of stereotypes. This is exemplified by Nicki Hitchcott's examination of another of Beyala's texts, *Assèze l'Africaine* (1994) when Hitchcott writes:

> On one level, Beyala appears to reconfirm these stereotypes: her novels are filled with examples of Africans who are stupid, oversexed, lazy, etc. When she returns to her village from Douala, Assèze is struck by the smell of rotting avocados. The villagers tell her that they were advised to get hold of an 'avocat' [avocado/lawyer] to protect them from a cocoa company wanting to take over their land. The rather limp linguistic joke here is made initially at the expense of the villagers and could be read as reinforcing stereotypical notions of African stupidity (*AA*, pp. 129–30). Yet the avocado offensive is, in fact, successful since the cocoa company's vehicles are unable to cross the rotting fruit. Thus the stereotype is implied and then subverted, forcing the reader to reassess any received ideas she might have.[109]

The seamless transition between 'implied and subverted', or between the act of reading and the reassessment of 'any received ideas', in this defence of Beyala's text might not be wrong in every instance, but it is simplistic. Through a comparative analysis of 'cringe comedy' this chapter has aimed to shed light on a less clean-cut, and therefore perhaps also more unsettling, mixture of emotions provoked by these authors' humorous parodic play upon clichés.

The growing popularity of 'cringe comedy' in contemporary culture suggests that viewers and readers actively seek out and enjoy, at least in some sense, the type of embarrassment that mockumentary films and fictions can generate. Whilst this seems to be an important reason behind why certain books and television shows have gained a significant public following – even a cult status in some instances – there is a conspicuous lack of

109 Hitchcott, *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration*, p.123.

critical work that deals with this type of reaction to a text. It is in an effort to think through the reasons for this absence of critical attention on a wider variety of effects produced by comic writing – and indeed, generated by literature more generally – that I want to turn in conclusion to the works of Rita Felski, whose theories about the 'uses' of literature provide an illuminating perspective on the ways in which we as critics try to valorise literature as well as our own work as literary critics.

Conclusion

In the opening chapter of *The Limits of Critique* (2015) Rita Felski asks two questions that she insists can no longer be ignored: why is literature worth bothering with?; and what is *at stake* in literary studies?[1] Felski's investigation into how literary critics answer these questions begins with the observation that there is a 'legitimation crisis' currently assailing the field of literary criticism. She notes that mounting anxiety about how to justify the study of literature has spawned a plethora of works that strive to reiterate the relevancy of reading, as illustrated by her enumeration of the following titles: *Why Does Literature Matter?*, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, *Why Poetry Matters*, *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters*, *Why the Humanities Still Matter*, *Why Milton Matters*, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters*, *Why Books Matter*, and *Why Comparative Literature Matters*.[2] The evident unease caused by questions pertaining to the purpose of reading acts as the starting point for Felski's appraisal of the way literary critics routinely rationalise their practice with recourse to the notion of 'critical thinking'.[3] In short, she argues that if the critical aspect of critique continues to be put on a pedestal to the detriment of other possible reactions to texts then we risk overshadowing important 'intellectual and imaginative alternatives'.[4]

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1 Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 14
2 Felski does not give the authors of these titles but she appears to be referring to the following works: John Farrell, *Why Does Literature Matter?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Mark William Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Philip Davis, *Why Victorian Literature Still Matters* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008); Frederick Luis Aldama, *Why The Humanities Matter: A Commonsense Approach* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008); Joseph Wittreich, *Why Milton Matters: A New Preface to his Writings* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Dennis J. Sumara, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002); David L. Ulin, *The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time* (Seattle: Sasquatch, 2010); Eugene Eoyang, *The Promise and Premise of Creativity: Why Comparative Literature Matters* (New York: Continuum, 2012).
3 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 4.
4 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 5.

Felski's project is in large part a response to the dominance of a certain mode of critical thinking that she feels has come to dictate current scholarship on literature: suspicion. Although she does not dismiss outright the importance of engaging sceptically with texts Felksi nonetheless proposes a move away from this interpretative stance, which, she explains, has become too predictable. Her impression is that:

> There is a growing sense that our intellectual life is out of kilter, that scholars in the humanities are far more fluent in nay-saying than in yay-saying, and that eternal vigilance, unchecked by alternatives, can easily lapse into the complacent cadences of autopilot argument. It is a matter, in short, of diminishing returns, of ways of thinking that no longer surprise us, while closing off other paths as 'insufficiently critical'.[5]

Among the ways of thinking about literature that are no longer surprising are arguments that make claims about the subversiveness of literary texts. Something of a bugbear for Felski, in her earlier work *Uses of Literature* (2008) she called attention to what she described as the critic's 'default options' of 'problematizing, interrogating, and subverting'.[6] The danger of automated argumentation reappears in *The Limits of Critique* when she underscores 'the ease with which a certain style of reading has settled into the default option' and asks: 'Why is it that critics are so quick off the mark to interrogate, unmask, expose, subvert, unravel, demystify, destabilize, take issue and take umbrage?'.[7] For Felski, these go-to positions correspond to the attitude of interrogation and scepticism that Paul Ricœur discerned in the writings of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud and that he collectively dubbed the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.[8] Felski advocates a reconsideration of the way that we value critique as a special

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5 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 9.
6 Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 2.
7 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 5.
8 It is worth pointing out that Sedgwick and Felski both note that the term 'hermeneutics of suspicion' was retrospectively proposed by Ricœur, and Alison Scott-Baumann has pointed out in *Paul Ricœur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (2009) that the term is frequently misunderstood and misattributed to Ricœur's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1965). According to Scott-Baumann, Ricœur hardly used the phrase, and this may have obscured some of the other theories Ricœur put forward: 'Misattribution, however, matters a great deal, as do his reasons for dropping it from his rich

or superior way of looking at literature by putting it into the wider context of suspicious modes of interpretation prevalent in other fields. In this way, she effectively downgrades critique's 'exceptional' status by showing it to be part of a more general tradition of sceptical thinking and reasoning.

As part of her project to put critique in its place, Felski draws upon Eve Sedgwick's work *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity* (2003) in which Sedgwick points out that the hermeneutics of suspicion was originally proposed by Ricœur alongside various alternatives, such as the hermeneutics of recovery and meaning. With this distinction Sedgwick shines a light on the fact that Ricœur's category of suspicion was 'taxonomic rather than imperative'. Her point is that the dominance of the hermeneutics of suspicion skews Ricœur's original concept, since it is now 'widely understood as a mandatory injunction rather than a possibility among other possibilities'.[9] She references Fredric Jameson's well-known axiom 'Always Historicize' to illustrate how the critical allegiance to scepticism can be seen in a comic light, asking if we really should:

> *Always* historicize? What could have less to do with historicizing than the commanding, atemporal adverb 'always'? It reminds me of the bumper stickers that instruct people in other cars to 'Question Authority'. Excellent advice, perhaps wasted on anyone who does whatever they're ordered to do by a strip of paper glued to an automobile! The imperative framing will do funny things to a hermeneutics of suspicion.[10]

With her jest at Jameson's overbearing overtones, Sedgwick highlights the paradoxical fact that what she calls paranoid reading practices have gained an almost obligatory status in literary and cultural studies, and emphasises that they were intended to constitute only one way of looking at cultural production. Moreover, the predominance of paranoia comes at a

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repertoire of memorable terms, not least because it may obscure from us the many other devices he developed to do the job that the hermeneutics of suspicion failed to do' (p. 76).
9 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy and Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 125.
10 Sedgwick, p. 125.

cost. Sedgwick warns that ingrained suspicious reading practices 'may have had an unintentionally stultifying side effect: they may have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller'.[11] In *Uses of Literature* and *The Limits of Critique* Felski picks up on this warning about the repercussions of an overreliance on scepticism in critical theory. For instance, in *Uses of Literature* Felski's reading of Sedgwick's work indicates that in the current critical climate it is challenging to uphold the value of literature without recourse to notions of agitation and political resistance:

> Sedgwick is not lamenting any lack of sophisticated, formally conscious, even celebratory readings of literary works. Her point is rather that critics find themselves unable to justify such readings except by imputing to these works an intent to subvert, interrogate, or disrupt that mirrors their own. The negative has become inescapably, overbearingly, normative.[12]

As we have seen, Felski returns to the leading questions about how to justify literature and literary criticism at the start of *The Limits of Critique*. In the latter text, she exposes the link between negative accounts of literature and the notion of subversion, expanding upon the same line of argument that runs through *Uses of Literature*. In her more recent work, Felski reinforces the idea that:

> We can only rationalize our love of works of art, it seems, by proving that they are engaged in critique – even if unwittingly and unknowingly. A particular novel or film thus serves as a meritorious exception to the ideologies that must be ritually condemned. All too often, we see critics tying themselves into knots in order to prove that a text harbors signs of dissonance and dissent – as if there were no other conceivable way of justifying its merits.

11 Sedgwick, p. 124.
12 Felski, *Uses of Literature*, p. 3.

> […] Both aesthetic and social worth, it seems, can only be cashed out in terms of a rhetoric of *againstness*.[13]

Felski goes on to point out that there are plenty of other motives for reading but laments the fact that these have received 'short shrift from critics scouring works of literature for every last crumb of real or imagined resistance'.[14] In her eyes, the reigning penchant for negatively nuanced analytical work has edged out other affective styles and modes of engagement, disproportionately privileging ideas such as subversion and interrogation. Despite expressing sympathy for the branch of critics who have urged for a more hopeful and optimistic approach to textual analysis, Felski does not side with their cause completely and she is quick to qualify her use of the term positive. Early on in her examination, she explains that 'what follows is not a pep talk for the power of positive thinking. There will be no stirring exhortations to put on a happy face and always look on the bright side of life. Academia has often been a haven for the disgruntled and disenchanted, for oddballs and misfits'.[15] This disclaimer aside, Felski goes on to argue that the overwhelmingly negative atmosphere of literary studies inhibits our ability to be fully receptive to texts. The crux of the problem, then, is that if on the one hand negativity shields a critic from accusations of naivety, on the other hand the adoption of an attitude of ironic detachment may also hinder him or her from being able to engage freely in the act of reading.

Rather than preach against pessimism *per se*, Felski's overriding message is that an adherence to suspicious reading practices is problematic because it blocks us off from thinking more broadly about the variety of different affective responses that we can experience as readers of a literary text. Perhaps 'enjoyment' could be seen as one example of the type of affective responses to literature that have routinely been sidelined as 'insufficiently critical' by the dominant attitudes of negativity and suspicion in literary

13 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp. 16–17.
14 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 17.
15 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p.12.

studies, bearing in mind of course that there are many different types of enjoyment that a reader may seek to experience from a novel or a poem.

Ultimately, Felski's aim in both works is to develop a type of post-critical reading practice. To this end, she advocates embracing a wider range of responses to literature, calling for more careful attention to the emotional reactions that literary works can provoke such as enchantment, shock, and identification – amongst others. She puts this point across particularly pithily in *The Limits of Critique* in her reminder to the reader that:

> Works of art do not only subvert but also convert; they do not only inform but also transform – a transformation that is not just a matter of intellectual readjustment but one of affective realignment as well (a shift of mood, a sharpened sensation, an unexpected surge of affinity or disorientation). Works of art, Chantal Mouffe notes, can trigger passionate attachments and sponsor new forms of identification, subjectivity, and perceptual possibility. And here critique is stymied by its assumption that anything that does not 'interrogate' the status quo is doomed to sustain it, that whatever is not critical languishes in the ignominious zone of the uncritical. Priding itself on the vigilance of its detachment, it proves a poor guide to the thickness and richness of our aesthetic attachments.[16]

Felski places an emphasis on literature's transformative power and the idea that it can bring about a change in the reader, but in some ways her argument hasn't entirely moved away from what is, essentially, another ideological justification for literature (in the sense that *conversion* doesn't seem so fundamentally different from *subversion*). Felski does call for an opening up of ideas about what literature – and literary criticism – can *do*, though, and in this way her re-articulation of critique can be distinguished from other recent movements that have similarly re-examined the merits of suspicious reading. For instance, the concept of 'surface reading' has gained a considerable following since it was discussed in a special edition of *Representations* in 2009. 'Surface reading' is something Felski discusses – and to

16 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, pp. 17–18.

a large extent also dismisses – in *The Limits of Critique*. Whilst it does have similar goals to Felksi's own project, the use of the metaphor of surface is something Felski, amongst others, has found unhelpful. Felksi points out that the idea of surface reading is long established and is a type of second-level hermeneutics, and she also (more damningly) highlights the fact that deep reading is not necessarily antagonistic and surface reading does not necessarily offer an escape from compulsory suspicion.[17]

Felski's works bring into sharp relief the limitations of critical work that habitually justifies literature in terms of its subversive effect. Her analysis in both *Uses of Literature* and *The Limits of Critique* suggests that the issues examined in this thesis regarding critical responses to parody in postcolonial fiction are part of a wider problem with certain entrenched patterns of argumentation that run across diverse critical fields. The notion of a text's subversive political impact has become a recurrent theme, it seems, a more or less reliable means through which critics seek to valorise literature and literary criticism. My response to the predominance of these types of claims has been to demonstrate how many of the 'subversive' readings of postcolonial parody are ill-founded. Furthermore, at several points in this thesis I have also called attention to the need for postcolonial theorists to re-evaluate in more pragmatic terms the link between comic language and allusions to its insurgent political impact.

Focusing in turn on irony, intertextuality, self-reflexivity, and mock-documentary, my examination of four different aspects of parodic expression puts forward alternative ways of thinking about textual and cultural borrowing in contemporary French-language fiction. Although I have not ruled out the idea that postcolonial parody can at times be interrogative and subversive, what I have wanted to do is show how the texts under discussion in this thesis do other things besides this (if they manage to do this at all). This objective forms part of an overarching effort to broaden the paradigm for analysing parody in postcolonial contexts in a way that doesn't prioritise parody – and, I suppose, humour in general – for its political engagement. The argument that I have tried to construct through my research, then,

17 Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, p. 55.

is that even if parody might legitimately have some quantifiable or documented social or ideological impact on a reader(ship), the political aspects of parodic literature must be taken into consideration *alongside other effects.*

The relationship between literature and subversion has been a central theme in all four of my chapters, and it is an issue that I set out to explore explicitly through a focus on the distinction between satire, irony, and parody in my first chapter on La Sape. My examination of the treatment of Sapeurs in three texts by Mabanckou began with a comparison of the ways in which this fashion movement has been envisaged by various socio-cultural commentators. La Sape provided fertile ground to compare contrasting views of what is understood by the term parody outside literary contexts and to illustrate the tendency of some literary critics to under-contextualise or otherwise simplify Mabanckou's works in an effort to uphold anthropological and sociological theories about La Sape as a form of cultural and political resistance. In contrast, my approach drew upon Linda Hutcheon's definition of postmodern parody to describe the Sapeur style of cultural borrowing. Hutcheon's rubric of parody as 'repetition with ironic distance or difference' was helpful in demonstrating how La Sape can be understood as parodic without necessarily being aimed at undermining a European centre or motivated by the desire to be anti-hegemonic.

In the second part of the chapter I went on to examine the way that Sapeurs are represented in *Black Bazar*, *Tais-toi et meurs*, and *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* and to stress how Mabanckou's texts take an ironic stance on the phenomenon. One of the advantages of separating interpretations of La Sape in cultural criticism from Mabanckou's ironic depictions of members of the group in his novels was that two different layers of humour clearly emerged: postmodern parody and irony. My analysis of the two layers put an emphasis on the overlapping nature of these comic devices but nevertheless insisted that they remain discrete. Some critics merge La Sape's parody with other comic techniques, namely satire, in a number of accounts of Mabanckou's works that use socio-cultural conceptualisations of La Sape as a means of bestowing a politically seditious dimension

upon the author's fiction. Conversely, this chapter maintained that even if La Sape has routinely been endowed with a rebellious edge by critics who perhaps seek out a sense of 'reflected glory' in their arguments about the radical effects of Sapeurs, as we have seen, this is in fact a paradoxically orthodox view of postcolonial parodic cultures and Mabanckou's ironic manipulation of Sapeurs does not support it. Rather, his works can be seen to undermine the movement's political pretensions.

The tendency to politicise parody to the detriment of other dimensions of literary analysis in postcolonial criticism is an issue that I continued to explore in my next chapter on intertextuality. By envisaging textual borrowing as a type of playful in-joke in two of Mabanckou's most popular novels – *Verre cassé* and *Black Bazar* – my examination countered the conventional postcolonial conceptualisation of intertextuality as a strategy of subversion. The priority here was to demonstrate how Mabanckou's use of intertexts creates three different types of comic effect associated with games, nonsense and farce. In order to illustrate these different effects as clearly as possible I divided the chapter into three parts. The first two parts examined how Mabanckou's intertextuality generates an uplifting and joyful experience for the reader both when it is recognised and when it is not. An analysis of examples from Mabanckou's works as Oulipian literary quizzes and Deleuzian 'surface' humour brought to light how the concept of 'writing back' fails to capture the playfulness that is characteristic of Mabanckou's fiction. In this way, I argued that Mabanckou's works highlight the need to broaden the narrow view of parody that has been championed by postcolonial theorists who have envisaged intertextual borrowing as a strategic ploy to undermine the authority of the European literary canon. To strengthen the claim that there is more to postcolonial intertextuality than political point-scoring, in the third part of this chapter I applied Jameson's reconceptualisation of parody as pastiche to Mabanckou's works. Using Jameson's notion of contemporary textual borrowing as 'blind' or 'flattened' parody, my analysis shed light on the author's play with the notion of originality and the fun that he creates through his toying with the idea of textual ownership. Overall, this chapter's emphasis on the pleasurable experience of reading Mabanckou's textual in-jokes complicates

the idea – implicit in the paradigm of 'writing back' – that intertextuality is unproblematically recognised by the reader as parodic subversion. It casts doubt, too, on the attendant assumption that postcolonial authors employ techniques like parodic intertextuality first and foremost in the interests of a political agenda.

I continued to explore other potential responses to postcolonial parody in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis, both of which examined Mabanckou's novels alongside works by Beyala and Laferrière. The third chapter focused on the concept of self-parody. It considered how self-reflexive humour can be seen to produce an unsettling sense of uncertainty for a readership that has come to expect postcolonial authors to be 'authentic'. The main aim of this chapter was to establish self-parody as an important tool used by Beyala, Mabanckou and Laferrière to poke fun at their public and professional personae. Whilst there are commonalities in these authors' adoption of this technique, a prominent divergence emerged between Beyala on the one hand and Mabanckou and Laferrière on the other, since Beyala predominantly uses performative self-parodic techniques to lampoon her image in the mainstream French media, whilst Laferrière and Mabanckou mock their position as famous postcolonial authors from within their novels. My objective was to illustrate how certain texts by Mabanckou and Laferrière can be read as examples of literary self-parody in which the authors play upon their own status as celebrity postcolonial writers by combining autofictional and metafictional techniques with self-directed mockery. Part of this argument entailed showing how a careful mirroring between the authors' biographies and the description of their central protagonists in novels such as *Je suis un écrivain japonais*, *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit?* and *Black Bazar* produces an ambiguous sense of quasi recognition for the reader who can only ever partially identify the fictional character as the 'real' author.

If Mabanckou and Laferrière take advantage of the fluctuation between fiction and non-fiction to poke fun at their celebrity status, by contrast, Beyala's metafictional and autofictional texts lack such a strong sense of self-deprecation, although I did try to show how one of her most self-referential novels – *L'Homme qui m'offrait le ciel* – could be seen

as an attempt at literary self-parody. On the whole, though, Beyala's strengths appear to lie in her ability to perform her position as a postcolonial author in the public eye. On closer inspection, this latter strategy came across as a paradoxical form of self-undermining that was comparatively less effective at compelling an audience to acknowledge the 'awkward' position in which celebrity postcolonial authors find themselves, which is to say simultaneously representing a type of exotic authenticity and a marketable, palatable version of themselves.

The topic of awkwardness was explored further in the fourth chapter, which argued that Beyala, Mabanckou, and Laferrière make fun out of their supposed 'representativity' as postcolonial authors through the use of a deliberately embarrassing style of humour also known as 'cringe comedy'. Postmodern scepticism towards claims to truth was central to this chapter's examination of four texts that I argued could be read as 'mockumentary' fictions. I contended that the ironic repetition of stereotypes in these novels produces a particular type of cringeworthy humour akin to the type of awkward amusement provoked by many mock-documentary films. The somewhat unorthodox methodological framework in this chapter converged around two different theories regarding the distinctively discomforting brand of humour characteristic of mock-documentary: parodic incongruity and sustained plausibility. An inter-disciplinary approach proved helpful in shedding light on the way a mock-documentary format offers postcolonial authors a useful tool for drawing attention to the way that they are consistently expected to have a sense of responsibility vis-à-vis social inequality and racism. Expectations of truth and transparency, this chapter insisted, can restrict readings of postcolonial fiction, and those expectations prime critics to interpret postcolonial parodic humour as politically subversive, rather than as a cringe-inducing style of comedy that draws upon taboo topics such as racial clichés.

Far from being a straightforward procedure, the use of ironic and parodic expression entails significant risks, a liability that Linda Hutcheon underscored in her discussion of 'irony's edge'. Hutcheon used a museum exhibition entitled 'Into the Heart of Africa' that ran at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto from 16 November 1989 to 6 August 1990 as a

case study to pursue her analysis of the politics of irony's appropriateness in the postcolonial context. She explored the public's dismissal of the curator's claims that the exhibit was intended ironically, and by reading it as a text in accordance with the methods championed by 'new museology', she pinpointed parts of the presentation of colonialism that failed to function as ironic statements. Hutcheon's investigation into the controversy that surrounded the exhibition probed the risks of using irony in postcolonial contexts. Concluding her chapter with a series of questions designed to prompt her readers to acknowledge the need to reconsider the value of ironic language in politicised contexts, Hutcheon alludes to the pitfall of presuming irony's influence in the form of subversion in her closing lines:

> Irony's transideological politics complicate the theorizing of irony mightily, and part of the reason is irony's edge. The affective responses provoked by 'Into the Heart of Africa' show that viewers (like readers and listeners) are not passive receivers; they are interpreting agents, with the emphasis on agency and, thus, on action. Because of this there were real, material consequences for the intending ironist. I raise this issue of the risks of irony most forcefully here at the end of this study primarily because it is too easy to forget the dangers in the face of the valorization of irony's subversive potential by much feminist, gay and lesbian, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theory and practice.[18]

Hutcheon's sensitivity to the affective responses provoked by the exhibition and her warning about the problematic role of irony – and by extension parody – as both a rhetorical device and a social and political tool in the contentious terrain of postcolonialism resonates with Felski's concerns about the type of default arguments that currently define literary-critical analysis more generally. Like Felski, Hutcheon also cautions against overemphasising the subversive reach of ironic repetition and she similarly flags up issues with regards to the viability of these claims by underscoring irony's dual nature. Essentially, Hutcheon highlights the fact that ironic and parodic language is never clean-cut or unequivocal, but

18 Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge*, pp. 202–204.

rather should be understood as an integrally complicit form of expression. Perhaps, then, it is only once this postmodern view of parodic texts has been taken into account by postcolonial critics that analysis of works like the ones I have examined in this thesis will move on from debates about the extent to which parody may or may not be subversive vis-à-vis racial stereotypes or the French literary canon to consider the many other effects generated by this device, and by the texts.

As long as postcolonial criticism envisages parody as a primarily subversive strategy then two problems will continue to crop up in accounts of parodic postcolonial fiction. The first is that arguments about parody's political resistance will keep requiring us to pare down the notion of subversion to a rather flat-footed understanding of what this term might mean, encouraging an overly simplistic understanding of how parody and humour function in literature and art. The second is that the rote rationalisation of postcolonial parody through recourse to its subversive value risks becoming an essentialising (not just stultifying!) critical manoeuvre. Effectively, it means that pleasure and the pursuit of playfulness in literary works by authors who fit a certain 'postcolonial' profile is rarely acknowledged to be one of the many possible reasons that readers are drawn to their novels. Indeed, the majority of examinations of parody in texts by postcolonial authors imply that their literary works are framed comically chiefly in order to heighten a resistant political agenda. I hope to have shown that this argument involves troubling assumptions about the attitudes and aspirations of postcolonial authors that usually depend upon a selective use of biography.

The application of postmodern theories of parody to the works of postcolonial writers highlights how the connotations of parody in the postcolonial domain are determined by knowledge or assumptions about the author in a way that would not stand up under scrutiny in other areas of literary criticism. An important common thread running through each section of this project has been the idea that many of the complexities of comedy's intention and reception are often glossed over in postcolonial criticism, notably through a fairly selective use of context. What I mean by this is that, in many cases, postcolonial criticism stresses the fact that a postcolonial author may have been born in a formerly colonised country rather than

putting emphasis on the fact that he or she may have also spent a considerable amount of time or currently reside in Europe or America. And it is worth bearing in mind that some 'postcolonial authors', such as Begag and Guène, were not born in formerly colonised countries. In this respect, my work raises questions about the parameters of a contemporary author's 'postcoloniality' that lead to another set of issues regarding the pertinence and benefits of associating certain writers with this label. Postcolonial authors, like others, have been influenced by diverse schools of thought and styles of writing, whose origins and attractions may have nothing to do with the particular colony or former colony with which they may be associated, and with which postcolonial critics associate them.

The preceding chapters have called for postcolonial criticism to take a more nuanced approach when assessing the impetus and impact of the comic works produced by today's postcolonial writers, arguing for a re-articulation – in more pragmatic terms – of the way a novel engages with a reader and the world. Broadly speaking, then, a reassessment of how parodic fiction may affect a reader also involves a reappraisal of how literature connects with politics. My analysis has not completely opposed the idea that parody in postcolonial texts has a potentially resistant quality or suggested that the reasons why postcolonial parody is interesting (and funny) can be detached entirely from the political contexts it brings into play. Rather, I have simply aimed to shed some light on the surprisingly uplifting and lighthearted dimensions of this technique that have been routinely overlooked in previous analysis. In this respect, my work has situated itself in line with other recent interventions in the field of postcolonialism that have sought to underscore the mutual embeddedness of politics and aesthetics in literature and film and the irreducibility of aesthetics to politics. It also follows in the recent turn towards a renewed emphasis on the literariness of postcolonial fiction.[19] Ultimately, the presence – indeed, abundance! – of innovative parodic techniques in novels by Mabanckou, Beyala and Laferrière serves to underscore the need for practitioners of postcolonial criticism to take into consideration other ways of legitimising and celebrating the

19 John McLeod, 'Postcolonialism and Literature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Graham Huggan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 449–466 (p. 461).

playful sides of parody in works of postcolonial literature. In doing so, critics of this type of writing might usefully intervene in the wider issue that Felski elucidates regarding the default positions of interrogation and subversion that dominate in certain branches of literary studies, by demonstrating that there are ways of looking beyond notions of political resistance in our justifications for being interested in – and enjoying – literature.

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